The Sanctuary

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Summary: Reinhard is a good guy.Those who have nowhere left to go fall under the protection of the Sword Saint.____Or: Ayamatsu but Reinhard adopts a bunch of kids and a few adults.

Chapter 1: Chapter 1

It wasn't long after the White Whale incident that his maid packed up and left.

It was abrupt, but not entirely unexpected. Reinhard's reputation hadn't been stellar for some time; when she politely, but very coldly, handed her uniform back, he couldn't blame her for that disgusted look in her eyes.

Honestly, he wasn't having much of an issue cooking and cleaning by himself. It wasn't to the same standards, but he didn't need it to be.

He was fine.

Well, mostly fine. The White Whale had probably taken a lot of victims with it (even one was too many), but no one would ever know who and how many. The only reason anyone knew what the White Whale did, exactly, were those rare, horrifying cases of madness linked to its victims. People who had, for all intents and purposes, been entirely sane until an attack, screaming that there was *someone* there before. Most of them never recovered. It was a haunting sight, to be sure. It was the reason people knew to fear the whale.

But everyone remembered Felix. Everyone knew he'd been there, and everyone knew he'd just up and vanished after the fight. Therefore, Felix hadn't been consumed.

Where was he, then? He didn't know. He'd been investigating, just like everyone else, but the already faint trail they had was beginning to go cold.

It was after another unsuccessful search that the girl arrived.

The girl was young. Too young to be out looking for a job, usually, but it wasn't unheard of. What he was concerned about was that his reputation was apparently not a dealbreaker for her. She was either clueless or desperate, and his heart ached for her either way.

He found her standing outside the gate when he returned home from his shift. His smile didn't seem to reassure her in the slightest.

"How may I help you?" he asked.

Her voice trembled when she spoke: "It's… sir, I heard… um…"

It wasn't just her voice. She was shaking. How long had she been standing out there?

"How long have you been waiting for me?"

"An hour or so. Sir."

He almost flinched. An hour. In the cold.

He bowed his head, hurriedly unlocking the gate: "Please, come inside. You must be freezing. You can tell me what's wrong when you feel better."

"Th… thank you."

She was quiet on their way in, twisting her hands anxiously as he boiled some water for their tea. He snuck a glance at her. She was dressed in an odd fashion: her clothes looked to have been finely made and expensive once, but only many years before. They were old. The edge of her sleeves was frayed and the fabric that must have once been a bright emerald green looked dusty and old. Her chestnut hair, shorter than what fashion demanded, had clearly been cut with something dull.

By the time he finally addressed the elephant in the room, the girl had stopped shaking.

“What do you need?” he asked her.

The girl’s left hand trembled against her cup of tea: “I need a job, sir. Your old maid informed me of a… vacancy, here. I know this is sudden, but…”

A shiver ran down his spine. Not from the cold, of course.

“I’m not really looking for a new maid. I’m sorry.” he started, but the look on the girl’s face was making him rethink that statement before he was even done speaking.

“Please, sir Reinhard.”

Her voice trembled: “I don’t… I’ve tried many places. No one wants someone as inexperienced as me, I can understand that, but… I don’t know what else to do. I know I had parents once, but I can’t remember a single thing about them, and now I’m alone and whatever we had at home is running out. I can’t support myself on my own, and the streets aren’t even safe enough to steal anymore. I know I shouldn’t say this to a knight, but I must be honest with you. Sir…” she pleaded, “Only until I have enough experience to be hired elsewhere, please, allow me to work here!”

She grabbed his hands, almost unconsciously: “You don’t have to pay me much. You don’t have to pay me at all, if you just give me shelter and food. Please, sir Reinhard.”

His mind was made up. He wasn’t quite sure why he kept asking her questions.

“What’s your name?”

The girl stood up and bowed: “Annika Ritter.”

“How old are you?”

“I’m fifteen.” she murmured, “I know I have no experience, and I know it’s-”

“Miss Ritter?”

She snapped at attention: “Yes, sir?”

Reinhard extended his hand to her.

“Welcome. I’ll show you to your room.”

Annika started working the very next day.

Inexperienced was, indeed, the right word for her. She spent the first few evenings at the mansion tending to minor cuts and bruises from peeling vegetables and climbing up ladders that were too tall for her, an inconvenience that was thankfully made easier by Annika’s affinity for water magic that allowed her to heal something as simple as cuts and bruises easily enough. Eventually, she let Reinhard convince her to share the work. It would be more productive for both of them.

Many good things came from hiring her, though. First of all, it left him more time to contribute to the investigation of Felix’s disappearance. Secondly, Annika was either too careless or too desperate to let Reinhard’s deteriorating reputation deter her from doing her best.

He asked her, on the first day: “Surely, you’ve heard rumours about me. Was it not a problem for you?”

“Rumours are everywhere, all the time.” said Annika, forcefully scrubbing a spot on the window, “If everyone let rumours stop them from reaching out to a possible employer, I

assure you, no one would ever find a job.”

And that was that. Annika worked hard, as new to taking care of a mansion as she was, and told him everything she heard in town that could be even remotely useful to his investigation.

It was an agreement born out of desperation, but it worked well enough.

As the world outside deteriorated, Annika’s hair began to grow healthier; her skin seemed to regain colour and her frail-looking frame gradually became stronger.

It made Reinhard think that maybe it wasn’t hopeless.

The peace lasted for a month at most.

Until one early morning, to be precise, when someone knocked at his front door.

Reinhard could tell whoever was on the other side was nervous before Annika even moved to open the door. Somehow, he could almost hear the tremble of their hand as they knocked, exactly four times, in a rather arrhythmic fashion.

Annika returned just as he stood up to go see for himself.

“Joshua Euclius, sir. He says it’s urgent.”

Well, that was odd. Sometimes Joshua would come by to give some news while Julius was out of town, but, as far as he knew, Julius was in the Capital too.

He shook his head. Speculation would do him no good. It was better to just ask him.

"Let him in." he told Annika.

She bowed and walked out, returning only a few seconds later with a very anxious Joshua in tow.

"Hi, Joshua." Reinhard greeted him, "How come you're here so early? Is something wrong?"

"Yes!" the boy exclaimed, "Terribly wrong. I'm here to enlist your help with this."

The knight walked around the chair to reach Joshua: "What is it?"

"Well, Julius left yesterday evening…"

A pit began to form in his stomach: "And?"

Joshua's hands trembled: "And he hasn’t come back."

Chapter 2: Chapter 2

He explained the rest of the story after chugging an impressive amount of tea in a single sip.

"Yesterday night, pretty late, I heard noises downstairs. He was going out. He told me it was nothing I had to worry about, but…" he shivered, "...the way he said goodbye… it scared me. My brother doesn't say *goodbye* when he leaves for business. He says *behave* , and *I'll see you later* . This time, he said *goodbye* . And he ruffled my hair. He hasn't done that since I was eight."

Reinhard nodded along. It was all he felt able to do, really. His head felt light and his shoulders felt incredibly heavy. Nodding was the only way he could be sure his head was still attached to the rest of his body.

"He didn’t say where he was going?"

"No." said Joshua, "He just told me not to worry about it. But I know where he went."

He was almost panting from anxiety as he dug through his coat pocket and produced a crumpled little note.

"This arrived yesterday evening." he explained, "My brother was already dressed for dinner. He never wears his uniform at dinner unless he's planning on leaving afterwards. But then, when I saw him later, he was wearing it. Which means he hadn't planned on going out, which means this note has something to do with it."

That was a good deduction.

“May I see it?”

Joshua handed the letter over without complaint, though his fingers seemed to clench involuntarily against it when Reinhard took it. He let go immediately, but it didn’t escape the knight's attention.

He knew who the letter was from before he read any of it. The handwriting was immediately recognisable.

Julius,

I'm sorry I disappeared. I'm also sorry I'm writing this, but I can’t be seen in public yet.

I need your help. Meet me at the address on the flipside of this page at 1am, alone. No one else knows I'm around, and I'd like for things to remain that way.

I know you won't be late. I'll explain everything.

Hoping to see you,

Your friend,

Felix

Reinhard breathed in, sharply.

He had never seen a more obvious trap in his life.

"You think that's where he went?" he murmured. It was hard to believe Julius wouldn't suspect something upon receiving a letter like that one. But then again…

"I don't know what else it could be." said Joshua. He sounded exhausted. He *looked* exhausted, too. There were two dark circles forming under his eyes that hadn't been there the last time he'd seen him.

"Joshua, did you sleep at all last night?" he asked, as gently as he could manage.

The boy yawned: "I slept as much as I could."

"Which is?"

"I'm sorry, but that's irrelevant." he said, "I tried to sleep. I can't. I just… I can't sleep until I know my brother is alright. I will not compromise on that. It would be useless to make a promise I can't keep and say I will stay put and sleep."

He puffed his chest proudly, which would definitely have looked much more effective if not for his trembling hands and tired eyes. That still left Reinhard a question.

"You had this address. Why did you come to me with this?"

Joshua's cheeks flushed a bit: "I… well, I… would've passed by there myself, but… well, I made a promise."

"What?"

His voice dropped to a whisper and his brows twitched upwards in a worried frown: "I think it was a few years ago; my brother made me promise that, if I ever thought something happened to him, I would… go to you right away, if possible. There were a few names on that list, but he made me promise I would ask for help."

Reinhard started breathing again. Mentally, he thanked his friend, hoping it would reach him, wherever he was. He had exclusive information, for one. For two, that meant Julius trusted him. He thanked him for that crucial bit of information he'd entrusted to him, albeit indirectly.

He stood from his chair: "You did well to listen to him. I'll look into it. That address is only on the other side of the city, so it shouldn't take long. Thank you for coming here with this information, Joshua."

"Will it help?"

"It's the most help I've had so far." Reinhard bowed: "Thank you."

He meant it.

Just as he was making his way to the door, though, he heard the unmistakable sound of hurried footsteps behind him and turned to find Joshua hot on his heels.

"What-"

"Forgive my boldness, sir, but I'm coming with you."

“No.” he answered, reflexively.

Reflexes didn't help him when the boy furrowed his brow, in such a painfully familiar way, and insisted: “Why not?”

“Because-” he stuttered, caught off-guard by the uncanny sight standing directly in front of him, “Because it isn't safe. There's a reason your brother didn't want you wandering on your own.”

“But I wouldn’t be on my own.” Joshua retorted, “Would I be incorrect in assuming I would be safer if I were in your company than if I were anywhere on my own, sir Reinhard?”

Oh.

Damn you, Julius.

Reinhard looked out the window. The street used to be much more lively.

“No, you would be correct.” he admitted.

Traveling with Reinhard was admittedly very convenient. The crowd parted before him, whether he wanted it or not, though the payment for that was that everyone stared at him, only to avert their eyes the moment he tried to look back. Reinhard didn't remember a lot of people's eyes. They never maintained eye contact long enough for him to get a good look.

Joshua, who had stared him straight in the eyes not an hour prior, was now ducking nervously behind him. There was one thing he didn't have in common with his brother: he never seemed to hold himself so proudly or gracefully. Reinhard had to wonder if, with time, that would change too.

He had no time to linger on it, though, because the face the bar's owner made when he saw the Sword Saint walk in required all of Reinhard’s attention.

"Good morning, sir." he greeted.

The owner did not greet them back.

"W… I… to what do I owe the pleasure?" he stuttered, losing a few shades of colour in his face. He looked guilty. Reinhard made note of it immediately, but it wasn’t a dead giveaway. Everyone reacted the same way to him walking in.

"You aren't in any trouble." he said, raising one hand in a placating gesture, "We're merely here to investigate the disappearance of one of our Imperial Knights."

" *What?* "

Okay, he could've phrased that better.

"We're not saying you're involved!" he clarified, silently pleading with Joshua to keep the venomous glares to himself for the time being, "This is just the last place where we know he's been. Do you know Julius Euclius?"

"No."

"He's my older brother!" Joshua piped up.

True, he could use that.

"Yes, thank you, Joshua. You see…" he gently nudged the boy forward so the owner could get a better look, "They look very similar, actually. If you've seen a young man with this same hair colour or a similar face…"

"Wearing a knight's uniform..."

"...yes, thank you, Joshua. Have you seen anyone like that around?"

The man stared at him for a moment, then shook his head.

"Nope. Sorry, kid. I haven’t seen your brother."

Joshua visibly deflated.

It only made Reinhard more desperate for answers, though. The owner had faltered, just for a moment. If he knew anything at all… well, Reinhard didn't like to intimidate people more than he already did just by walking around, but he needed to find Julius, and fast.

"Are you sure?" he insisted, "He should have come here at around one in the morning, last ni-"

"What?? One?" the man stuttered, "This bar wasn't even open at one! Why on earth would he have come here?"

"To meet someone. Did anyone linger here last night, after closing time?"

That seemed to give him pause.

Reinhard's heart sank a bit. If there *had* been someone there, he could only hope it was Felix. If it was anyone else, then…

"No." the man decided, "No, I checked that the place was empty."

Reinhard sighed. With a heavy heart, he resigned himself to looking elsewhere. Maybe Julius had never even reached the bar. Maybe he'd been attacked on the way there, or maybe on the way back.

"I understand. Thank you for your time." he murmured. He turned back to Joshua, ready to tell him that it was time to leave, but no one was behind him.

His heart, from where it had sunk all the way down, instantly jumped up in his throat.

Where was he? He had *one* job. Just one. How on earth had he managed to screw it up so fast?

He didn't have time to panic. Mostly because Joshua's head popped up over the counter less than a second later, causing the owner to mumble a truly impressive string of curses.

"Say, you have quite a lot of money here, for a bar like this." he observed.

Reinhard was just about to reprimand him for sneaking behind the counter to look through the man's possessions, until it occurred to him that Joshua had a point.

"Why is that?" he asked the man, as politely as possible, watching all the blood drain from his face.

All it took was a single step in his direction and the owner cracked and spilled: "I- I didn't lie! I never saw Sir Julius here. I just saw him heading in this direction. A-ah, but I did see people leaving, yesterday night. There was a young man in black robes and a guy that left in a cart and… and the knight, Felix Argyle. They paid me to keep quiet. But I didn't see anything, I swear!!"

Reinhard wasn't angry. Really, he wasn't. But he was tired enough to *sound* angry to the ears of a coward.

"So, let me get this straight." he reviewed, calmly, "You were aware of not one, but two missing knights of Lugnica, and you said nothing."

"I-"

"I'm sorry to say this, sir, but this could potentially be very serious." he frowned, "So, if you have any information at all, anything that could help us find them, I would consider you a collaborator and therefore I would have no reason to charge you with anything. But, if you were to withhold information, I'm afraid I would have no choice but to

consider you an accomplice and you would have to remain under my watch until Sir Julius is found."

The man shuddered.

Reinhard smiled without an ounce of joy: "Am I being clear, sir?"

The man pointed them in the direction where he'd seen the cart go. The cart was the only place they could've hidden Julius. And, judging by what he'd told them, about finding shattered glass on the floor and a puddle of alcohol that smelled just a little bit strange, well.

It was starting to look too much like a kidnapping for his tastes.

Reinhard shivered. He knew that Lady Anastasia had already sent people out to look for Julius. So she must not have received any ransom requests. He himself and Joshua had also heard nothing on the kidnappers' part, so what did they want, exactly?

There were several options. He hated all of them.

Somehow, he began to hope that it had something to do with him, if only so that he had leverage to balance the one they had against him.

If it came down to it, he would gladly let them run him through with a sword as long as it meant no one else would be harmed. Unfortunately, he had no guarantee that he was involved in any way, so that plan was not guaranteed to work.

Of course, he could always make it through with brute force, but that failed to account for the possibility of a hostage situation. Reinhard spent every day and night praying that his enemies wouldn't figure out that *that* was the way to his heart. A hostage was just about the only thing that could put him in danger. Maybe someone had finally figured that out.

A road of vague *no* s and *maybe* s led them to the outskirts of town and then to the swamp.

Any trace of a smile on their faces had already fallen.

“Joshua, stay close to me. Okay?”

The kid nodded. Through the thick, foul-smelling mist of the swamp, they could hardly see five feet ahead of them. Well, that wasn’t accurate. Reinhard could see a bit further ahead than Joshua and he was determined to use that to his advantage in case they found something he might not want to see.

The disadvantage, of course, was that it would be easy to lose each other there.

He didn’t have to worry about that for long. Joshua, almost unconsciously, reached out for his sleeve and held on to it.

Slightly reassured, they made their way through any dry patches of earth they could find until, stuck between the thick, twisted roots of a dying tree, Reinhard spotted something.

Something white.

His heart jumped. He put his arm out to stop Joshua: “Don’t move. There’s something up ahead.”

The grip on his sleeve tightened: “What is it?”

“I’ll go look. Stay right here and don’t move.”

“No-”

“Joshua, it could be bad. It’ll only take a moment, alright?”

Joshua’s arm trembled, but he listened and let go of his coat. Reinhard didn’t want to check it out any more than he did, but it could be important. The closer he got, the more he realised it was, indeed, important.

The thing stuck between the roots was a knight’s cape.

More importantly, it wasn’t empty.

He already had a terrible feeling seeing the cape. But whatever was inside would determine exactly how bad the feeling was. He paused for a moment, just before his hand reached the nearest fold of the cold, wet fabric. What if it was dangerous? What if it was an explosive, or something like that?

No matter , he shook his head, *if it is, I can be a shield.*

With that thought in mind, he pulled the top of the cape down.

His heart stopped.

Chapter 3: Chapter 3

He had expected a lot of things.

Stolen goods, explosives, a message. Maybe even nothing. Maybe just the water of the stream inflating the cape, making it look like there was something inside it.

He had not expected to come face to face with his friend, paler than any living person could be, with the faintest traces of blood on his chest and nothing behind his amber eyes. His chest was still and those few little cuts were clean. His neck didn't pulse with life when Reinhard placed his hands on both sides of his head to look him in his glassy eyes. His skin was ice cold.

He knew before he even touched him: Julius was dead.

Reinhard wanted to scream. He wanted to scream so badly. He wanted his furious scream to drag out whoever was responsible by their hair and make them look at what they'd done.

He didn't scream.

Instead, he just let himself collapse against his friend's cold shoulder for a moment. Just a moment, just to see if maybe he'd missed a heartbeat, a twitch, a breath, *anything* . Just to see if, when he looked up again, there would be life behind his eyes again.

There wasn't.

He almost flinched when Joshua called out to him. He sounded frightened. Of course he did.

He couldn't see him. He couldn't see him. He could not be allowed to see.

Reinhard dragged himself to his feet, intercepting the boy before he could get close enough to see what he'd found. He had to hold him by the shoulders to make sure he wouldn't duck and run past him: "Please, Joshua. Go no further."

"What did you find?" he stuttered, "Let me go. What's there? Why…"

Joshua looked him in the eyes and his face lost all its colour.

"...why are you crying, Reinhard?"

He managed to keep him still, but only until he finally found the strength to tell him what he'd found. Without letting go of his shoulders, he knelt in the dirt and lowered his head. The apology was only a part of that gesture. The other was that looking at Joshua's face and comparing it to the one he'd just seen made his heart sink like a stone into his gut.

"I'm sorry, Joshua."

The boy started trembling under his grip.

"I found him. But he's… I mean, it's… I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." he repeated, quietly, so Joshua couldn't hear his voice cracking.

He couldn't stop Joshua when he ran past him without a word. Well, not quite: he could have, of course. But, when he heard him scream in anguish behind him, he was almost relieved.

That way, no one would hear him sobbing.

His eyes were dry by the time they returned to the mansion. Reinhard had called the guards to take the body away while he led Joshua back by the shoulders.

He was still crying.

And he didn't stop, presumably, after he'd locked himself in the guest room Reinhard had pointed him to.

As for Reinhard himself, he'd long since stopped crying, and he didn't feel like he would start again anytime soon. Where there had been a weight in his chest earlier, there was just… nothing. A hole where his heart should have been. The weight had shifted to his spine instead, forcing him to stay seated, staring straight ahead.

He didn't flinch when the ever-quiet Annika tapped him on the shoulder. He did struggle to turn and look at her, though, only to find her carrying a tray with two hot cups of tea on it.

Without a word, she offered one and, without a word, he accepted it.

The warmth gave him the clarity he needed to recall his terrible manners.

"Thank you." he hurriedly corrected, "I'm… not all there today, I'm afraid."

Annika's eyes turned sad: "You can't be blamed for that. If you want to retire early, sir…"

"No, it's alright. I'm just…"

He frowned slightly. What *was* he? Sad? Afraid? Angry?

He searched his mind for a more acceptable emotion. He didn't find any.

"I'm just grieving, I suppose." he murmured.

The maid nodded: "Please, allow me to offer my condolences."

"Thank you."

She glanced at the stairs: "Should I…?" she asked, eyeing the remaining cup of tea on her tray.

He shook his head: "No, don't disturb him for now. You can drink that, if you want."

Annika hesitated, but she finally nodded her head in thanks and set the tray down, sitting across from him to drink her tea.

A few minutes passed in silence.

Then, perhaps encouraged by his unusual silence, she asked him: "I'm very sorry to ask but… were you close?"

"Quite." he nodded.

"Ah."

"I'm more worried about Joshua." he sighed, "They don't… *didn't* have parents either, you know. And he's a bit too young to be living on his own."

Something sparked in Annika's eyes: "I understand that."

"Annika?"

"Yes, sir?"

“Do you think…” he paused, “Do you think it would be appropriate to ask him to stay here for some time? He doesn’t exactly have problems regarding his financial situation, mind you, but…”

“You’re afraid for his safety.” she completed.

“Yes.”

“I think you should ask him. Forgive my bluntness, but it sounds like it would be unsafe to leave him alone when we don’t know why- I mean, what those people were after. For all we know, it’s a family thing.”

A shiver ran up his spine: “I’m not sure of that, but it *is* a possibility. You’re right. Although I suspect that… *that* had more to do with him being a knight than a member of the Euclius family. He was the second imperial knight to suddenly go missing, and others have been turning up dead in the streets.”

“And why do you suppose they tried to hide this one?” she asked.

That was a good question. He had no idea. Maybe the perpetrators were different people after all. If not for the fact that…

“They have Felix too.” he murmured, and his voice cracked almost imperceptibly, “He was seen with the one who likely took the body away. He was alive yesterday night, but…”

“...that is liable to change?” she guessed.

“Yes. And, more importantly, if he’s been with those people all this time…” he shivered, visibly, and Annika noticed.

She set her empty cup back on the tray, almost encouraging him to do the same before his trembling hands could make him spill the tea over himself.

“Are you worried that he’s there against his will?”

“He has to be.” Reinhard whispered, “It can’t be otherwise. Felix would not betray us if he wasn’t forced to. Maybe not even then. Maybe that’s why they-”

He cut himself off.

Killed Julius.

You can say those words.

They’re real whether you say them or not.

Annika gave him a compassionate look: “I’m sorry to ask this, but… he wasn’t…” her voice lowered to a whisper, “I, uh… I don’t know how to put this. Do you know if Sir Julius… no. I’m sorry, forget I asked.” she shook her head, “You really should rest, sir Reinhard. You look like you’re going to crumble otherwise.”

He frowned. What was she going to ask?

Didn’t know how to say it?

The idea was like a cold shower. That was how he knew he’d guessed.

“No.” he murmured, “He wasn’t tortured.”

Annika flinched.

“Was that what you were going to ask, Annika?” he asked, knowing the answer.

She nodded, shyly: “I’m sorry for bringing… *that* up.”

“No, it was a legitimate question. It would have been… different, if they had. It was a legitimate question.”

He forced himself to talk over the knot in his throat and forced himself to smile despite all the muscles in his face trying to tug his lips down.

“It was a good question.”

If she heard his voice cracking, she didn’t mention it.

Chapter 4: Chapter 4

When Reinhard finally resigned himself to return to his bedroom, he passed by the guest room to hear nothing but silence on the other side of the door. For a moment, it made his heart beat faster.

Calm down , he told himself, *he must've stopped crying. That's all.*

He found himself opening the door anyway, as quietly as he could manage.

The room was dark, probably. He wouldn't know it for sure. Regardless, he could clearly see the little figure curled up on the bed.

He sighed quietly. Was it relief or fond exasperation over seeing how he'd fallen asleep? He wasn't sure.

Joshua still had his monocle on. It was pressing into the side of his face, but it didn't seem to bother him. He was hugging a pillow to his chest like a stuffed animal.

Reinhard, as gently as possible, pried the monocle out from under his face so it wouldn't leave even more of a mark than it already had and pulled the covers up over his shoulders. He frowned a bit. Joshua's eyelids were red and clearly swollen. He'd probably cried himself to sleep, but at least he seemed to be having peaceful dreams.

"May your dreams treat you better than what you saw today." Reinhard murmured, "I won't let you see anything like that again. I'm so sorry."

Joshua shifted a bit in his sleep, but didn't wake up.

Reinhard left the room and finally, later than anyone should, went to bed.

His blessing of good dreams may have worked on Joshua, but it certainly hadn't worked on himself. Reinhard woke up at least four times that night, tormented by a pale face with glassy eyes.

The fifth time, he decided not to go back to sleep and instead spent those few hours that remained before sunrise doing everything he could to distract himself from the thoughts that haunted him.

Nothing was working. He stared at a page for an hour without reading a single word. The ink of the pages before him shifted continuously to form different words, the same ones that tugged at his conscience: *Julius is dead. Felix is still missing. Felix is in danger. There is something wrong here. I don't know what they wanted. I don't know why they took them. No one is safe until I know. No one is safe until I do something.*

The very words he'd said to Annika the previous night laughed in his face.

He wasn't tortured.

Wasn't he, though? How would he know that? There were ways to inflict pain without injury. There were ways to heal someone from terrible injuries. The healer that had examined him had said it was poison, but he hadn't specified which one.

He wasn't tortured.

Reinhard had never wanted to be right so badly.

He shoved all of those thoughts to the back of his mind when he went to breakfast, though his stomach turned the moment he took the first bite.

"Good morning." said Annika, looking like she hadn't slept as well as she could have. That made three of them, then.

"Good morning." he replied, "How are you feeling today?"

It was a habit he'd picked up. Asking her every morning how she was feeling. He knew she would answer honestly, because Annika wasn't the type to sugarcoat too much, as he'd soon found out.

Annika, for the first time in a month, didn't give him a straight answer: "With all due respect, Sir Reinhard, I feel like I should be the one asking you that question."

"I'm fine." he smiled, "But how are you?"

She frowned in response: "Sir, haven't I always given you an honest answer?"

His stomach sank: "Of course."

"I think I deserve the same, then."

She was right, of course, but Reinhard didn't particularly want to regale a little girl with tales of murder. He decided to humour her, at least partially.

"I had nightmares." he admitted, "That's all, really. But I'm not surprised."

She nodded, satisfied with his answer.

"I didn't sleep very well, either." she said.

He didn't tell her about the other thoughts.

Joshua came downstairs quietly. He had his monocle on again and both the glass and his face were spotless, indicating he'd probably woken up some time before and spent it cleaning up. Fair enough.

"Hello, Joshua." Reinhard greeted him, smiling as reassuringly as he could: "Do you… feel any better?"

"I don't feel worse." was the only response he got. Well, it was something, at least.

"Did you sleep alright?"

For just a moment, he could've sworn he'd seen the ghost of a familiar smile on the boy's face. A moment and nothing more.

"I had a good dream." he said, "But that was all it was."

Reinhard smiled back and hoped it looked fine. Judging by the look Joshua and Annika exchanged when he was about to leave, it didn't.

"You again!"

The owner of the bar was less than happy to see him back there that morning.

"I already told you everything!" he protested, never letting Reinhard get a single word in, "Just 'cause you didn't find the guy alive doesn't mean it was my fault, alright? I had no idea. You said I wasn't in any trouble!"

"You're not!" Reinhard snapped. His version of a *snap* was significantly milder than most, but the man flinched back anyway.

The knight sighed: “I’m here to ask a few more questions. There are some details that could help me locate the other missing knight.”

Seeing the look the owner gave him, he added: “Unlike Sir Julius, he was missing for a rather long time, yet you say you saw him alive the other night. Is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“Was he injured or restrained?”

“No.” the man shook his head, “But the other guy never let go of his shoulders, the entire time. That doesn’t count as restraint, does it?”

Reinhard had a shiver: “It very well could. We don’t know exactly who we’re dealing with. Did you notice anything else about Sir Felix? Like…” he hesitated, “...his emotional state, for instance?”

The owner paused to think. He scratched his chin for a moment, but then his eyes fell on Reinhard’s face. His expression softened just a little: “You look very pale, Sir Reinhard.”

“I’m fine.” he assured him, “Please, answer the question. The sooner we finish here, the sooner I’ll be out of your way.”

“Well, alright.” shrugged the man, “I didn’t get a good look at his face. It was pretty dark. But I think I saw him shaking.”

Reinhard’s stomach dropped: “Ah.”

“I can see why.” he continued, “The boy in black had something about him that wasn’t right, I tell you. He didn’t sound like kids his age should.”

“What can you tell me about this boy?”

“Not much. I saw even less of him than of Sir Felix. He had a hood pulled over his head and… well…” he hesitated, “I can’t be sure, but his cloak looked like… like it might’ve belonged to a disciple of the Witch.”

Reinhard didn’t realise he’d stood up until he heard the chair crashing to the floor behind him.

A witch cultist. That explained everything and nothing at the same time. On one hand, their lack of a stated goal made them incredibly unpredictable. On the other, the recent murders seemed too methodical to fit that bill.

But all that reasoning came after. The first thought he had, loud and desperate, was: *the witch cult has Felix.*

Chapter 5: Intermission #1

“You switched out the poison.”

His master didn’t flinch at the accusation. He never seemed to be surprised by anything, for some reason. He just looked back with a half smile: “What do you mean, Blue?”

“You switched out the poison.” he repeated with a shaking voice, holding up a little silver ring: “You gave me the wrong ring, didn’t you?”

“So what if I did?”

Nothing seemed to bother him.

“I told you I didn’t want him to suffer. You agreed with me. You said I could just put him to sleep!” he snapped, but even that didn’t seem to cause a reaction.

“Ah, damn. I did, didn’t I?” sighed his master, running a hand through his messy black hair, “Sorry. I didn’t think you cared that much.”

The apology was clearly insincere, but Felix had long since stopped caring.

“You didn’t-” he started, but he cut himself off with a sigh, “Why did you do that? I told you. I asked you one thing and you said- you *promised* it would be quick!”

His blood froze in his veins with one glance from the boy sitting before him. That was when he knew he’d gone too far, raised his voice just a little too loud. That was when he knew he'd lit the fuse; the darkness was going to slip out.

“ *Quick* ? Well…” his master grinned, “It was, wasn’t it? You say *quick* like there’s a specific time, but there isn’t. He still died within a minute or two, yes? Do you know how much pain someone can go through in a few minutes, Blue? I could’ve done anything. But…” he sighed, standing from his seat, “...this really makes me think; if I’d asked you to stretch it out, specifically, if I’d asked you to make him suffer, would you have done it? It seems to me like your loyalty isn't as unconditional as you said it would be. Where do you draw the line, hm?”

His heart skipped a beat: “No, I-”

The boy ignored him: “Let’s say I had told you to stab him a dozen times, like… in the gut. That hurts a lot, you know? Would you have done it?”

“I…”

“Or, oh! What if I’d told you to slit his throat? It takes about as long as the poison but… trust me, it is so much worse. What if I’d told you to strangle him with your own hands, or drown him, what if I’d ordered you to break his ribs and watch him choke? Oh, that one is *nasty* !” he exclaimed, and his eyes gleamed with manic delight. He clapped a couple of times: “There are a lot of bones you can break in someone’s body, and they all hurt like hell. Believe me."

“I- I couldn-” Felix forced his hands to stop shaking: “I couldn’t have done that. Julius is stronger than me. No matter how much he trusted me, he wouldn’t have let me-”

“Oh, enough with the excuses!”

Felix flinched.

“Don’t act like I haven’t seen you paralyse people before, Blue.” smiled the boy, “You had every opportunity to do that. Do you have any idea how long you can draw out a

death? Hell, me and Elsa just got back from something like that a few days before it was your turn. I told you about it, yes?”

“I… yes.” he answered. He didn’t want to hear the story about the Archbishop of Greed again.

“So then, aren’t you glad I didn’t send Elsa in, like I was going to?”

“Yes. I am.”

“And don’t you think that was quick and easy, just like you asked?”

“Yes.”

“So then…” his master sighed and scratched behind his ear affectionately, “Are you still mad at me, Blue?” he asked, making an exaggerated sad face at him.

Felix looked away.

“No. I’m sorry I yelled at you.”

“All is forgiven, then!”

“Yes." he murmured, "All…"

He forced his heart to stop racing.

“...forgiven.”

Chapter 6: Chapter 6

The search for the young cultist was unsuccessful. Worse, Reinhard wasn’t deaf to the rumours all around him.

People called him a failure, uncaring, undeserving of his blessings, nothing but a holier-than-thou nobleman who only got involved when his friends were dropping dead. He asked Annika to tell him everything she heard on the street, he *insisted* , and she reluctantly told him everything and then some.

“A local noblewoman offered me a job just so I would get away from you.” she confessed, quietly, “I turned her down and they were all looking at me with… pity.”

She looked disgusted. She had spat out the word *pity* like it was poison.

A question came to mind: “Why didn’t you accept her offer?”

Annika smiled, shyly: “I like it here. Those people don’t know what they’re talking about. Besides, if I went to work there, they’d lose interest in me as soon as they get every bit of gossip out of me. I'm slow at cleaning, and I mess up too often when I'm cooking. For all I know, I’ll be back on the street in a month if I agree.”

He felt something tug at his chest: “That won’t happen.”

She just smiled.

Following an off-hand suggestion from a fellow knight, Reinhard took a trip over to Margrave Mathers' mansion. It wasn’t exactly a last-ditch effort, but it wasn’t… his first pick, either, so to speak. He meant the Margrave no disrespect, of course, but the atmosphere he'd felt lingering around him triggered his defenses.

He wasn’t sure why.

Still, he took a deep breath and pressed on. The Emilia camp had been responsible for every major victory against the witch cult. Surely, if ever there was someone who could help-

"I'm afraid there's not much I can do about thaaaaat."

What?

"What do you mean?" he asked. Had he misheard?

The Margrave shook his head: "Well, you see, it's true we've been fighting agaaaaainst them, but we haven't exactly been picking those fights. They just caaaame to us."

"But… surely, you must know something!"

"Not so."

Reinhard’s hands shook for a moment: "I understand. If… if, however, you should come across them again, please, consider helping our investigation."

" *Our* ?" the man repeated, "Yours and who else's?"

"The knights' order, of course."

He heard a whisper far behind him that he probably wasn't meant to hear.

"Sister, sister, our guest is looking tense."

"Rem, Rem, our guest might get angry."

Lady Emilia scolded the maids with her eyes from her seat next to the lord of the mansion.

The Margrave, either because he hadn't heard them or because he didn't care, ignored their comments: "Really? It seems to me like you're aaaaaall on your own here, Sir Reinhard. I hear you were nowhere to be seen during the struggle against the White Whale. You know, some may find it suspicious, how you only got involved after your frieeend got hurt."

That wasn't touching a nerve. It was straight up punching it.

"I was not involved in the fight until it was too late, because no one told me it was happening." he retorted, through gritted teeth, "Sir Julius's death had nothing to do with it. It was simply a reminder of the dangers we are facing, and how they may be connected. I was hesitant to ask for your help, but I see I have no choice if I want to be a part of the fight for our kingdom. No one else will involve me."

"Have you considered whyyy?"

"As it is, why they don't ask for my help when they want it is beyond me. It's also not my most pressing concern. I can worry about my standing once this terror is over, whether I am the one that stops it or not. I'm not too proud to beg, Margrave. Who takes the credit is of no importance to me; if the price of your help is my full support in crowning Lady Emilia, I will pay it. Just, please…" his voice dropped, "Please, help me."

Lady Emilia shifted uncomfortably in her seat. His words had struck something, he could tell. Coming from her, he sensed nothing but a desire to help. However, even that pure feeling was obfuscated by the overwhelming indifference radiating from the Margrave. He knew his answer before he ever spoke.

"No."

Reinhard's shoulders fell.

"Why not?" stuttered Lady Emilia, "B… but, Roswaal, he-"

"Has nooothing to offer us."

"He said he would help us. I… I thought you wanted more endorsements. I think we should-"

"Lady Emilia, you aren't in charge of our alliances. Sir Reinhard is powerful, yes, but asking for our help will just make him look even more pathetic in the eyes of the public."

Reinhard didn't realise he'd stood up until he heard the screech of the chair against the floor.

The Margrave once again ignored it: "We have noooo use for that kind of help, I'm afraid."

He turned to Reinhard, with nothing but cold indifference behind his mismatched eyes.

"I must ask you to leave."

Leave he did, without saying a word. He felt Lady Emilia's eyes on his back as he went.

He had no idea what to do next.

That night, he talked to Joshua. They hadn't officially discussed the topic of him staying at the mansion for a while, though he hadn't expressed a desire to return home either.

He almost seemed to dread it, in fact.

“Joshua?” he called, stopping him just outside the dining room, “Can I talk to you for a moment?”

He looked nervous. That wasn’t unusual.

He cleared his throat: “Of course.”

“I wanted to ask you something, about… well, your stay here.” he started, gesturing vaguely at the corridor and the mansion as a whole.

Joshua’s cheeks flushed, only to lose their colour a moment later: “Oh! Oh, where are my manners? Of course! I- uh, well, it would be difficult to return now, but tomorrow morning, first thing-”

He could have laughed, or cried. He wasn’t sure. He settled on a nervous laugh: “No, Joshua, no, I wasn’t asking you to leave!”

Joshua adjusted his monocle: “You weren’t?”

“No, of course not! I was actually going to ask if you would be fine with staying here a little longer.”

He looked happy. Then embarrassed. Then suspicious. Finally, he regained that painfully familiar composure of his: “I… hm. I suppose that might be beneficial. *Mutually* beneficial, that is. Of course. I wouldn’t- uh- I wouldn’t agree to something that isn’t mutually beneficial.”

Reinhard felt a spark of joy somewhere in his heart: “Is that a yes?”

“I- um… yes. It is. A yes, that is.”

“Thank you!” he blurted out before he could stop himself. He wasn’t sure who he was thanking. Joshua, or fate, or the powers-that-be. It didn’t matter. He was just thankful.

“You’re welcome. I suppose. Am I doing this right?” mumbled Joshua, though the last part was perhaps unintentional.

Either way, for once, Reinhard slept peacefully.

For the first time in days, he was doing something right.

It was strange to not be alone.

Or lonely, for that matter. Even when the old maid was still at the mansion, their relationship had always been purely professional in spite of his attempts to break the ice.

Having Annika, and then Joshua, around was different. They were kids. They were both itching to talk, and run, and they both needed all the support they could get. Annika, suddenly orphaned, and Joshua, losing the last of his family without warning, were both alone before reaching the age anyone could be left alone.

He had seen them talk about it, actually, in hushed tones. Days earlier, he’d caught the echo of Annika murmuring: “I know.”

Since that day, they’d been talking, lowering their voice when Reinhard passed them by. Joshua had even started helping her clean, despite their insistence that it wasn’t necessary and his complete inexperience.

“It would be unbecoming to live in someone else’s home without ever helping them.” he retorted, and they couldn’t convince him otherwise. They didn’t particularly want to, either. It looked, for all the world, like doing work around the house was actually helping keep Joshua’s mind off everything he’d heard and seen. Reinhard wasn’t willing to take that away from him.

One thing bothered him. Through no fault of his, Joshua had adopted certain expressions, tics and mannerisms that were just a little too eerily reminiscent of his brother. The way he pushed his hair aside, for example. The way he knit his brows together when he frowned, the way he adjusted his jacket, his voice on certain words, his smile.

It just hurt.

Chapter 7: Chapter 7

He woke up past midnight, with no explanation as to why.

No explanation, of course, until he felt a torrential wave of despair wash over him from somewhere on his left. That explained everything.

Reinhard didn't especially like using his blessing of Divine Empathy. He had to activate it willingly if he wanted to read someone's emotions down to the most secret ones, and emotions, particularly those that were buried in the back of people's minds, could be ugly. Most of the time, Reinhard preferred to rely on body language instead. It was simpler, it didn't distract him with heavy, secret feelings, and it didn't feel like an invasion of privacy.

All that being said, sometimes, an emotion was just so overpowering that he could feel it anyway.

That sadness wasn't his own. It came from the guest bedroom on the other side of the corridor. Or, more accurately, the room that had become Joshua's bedroom.

He could feel that all-encompassing despair radiate from the room long before he was close enough to hear muffled sobs somewhere on the other side. He glanced across the hallway. Annika wasn't going to wake up if he just knocked, was she? No, she probably wasn't even going to hear it.

He brought his knuckles up to the door.

Please, let me in.

He knocked.

A stifled gasp. Silence. Then, quiet steps muffled by the carpet and the click of a lock and the creak of a door opening slowly, just a crack, just enough for one yellow eye to stare back at him.

"Yes?"

Joshua, to his credit, had somewhat regained his composure. His voice was a little shaky, but it was nothing like the uncontrollable sobs and screams of that cursed morning.

It occurred to him that he had not planned the interaction in the slightest. He would just have to improvise.

"Hello, Joshua." he greeted, "I'm sorry for coming by this late, but how come you're still awake? Do you need anything?"

To say that the boy looked unimpressed would be a bit excessive, but he certainly didn't look enthusiastic.

"I just woke up." he mumbled, probably telling something close to the truth at least, "It happens. I don't need any help right now, thank you."

"Are you sure?"

Instead of a *yes* or a *no* , Joshua gave him a question in response: "Why are you so concerned, sir? Your timing is a little too perfect."

He sighed. No use lying.

"I don't know if you know this, but I have a blessing of Divine Empathy." he explained, "I can read emotions. I just felt a truly worrying wave of sadness coming from this area

and I wanted to check in on you. That's all."

Joshua, probably unaware of his blessing of Night Vision, didn't try to hide the way his face flushed. He did, unsuccessfully, attempt to hide his stutter when he said: "A-ah. Well, that is- I didn't know that, actually. I don't- I don't think I knew that."

"So, do you want to talk about it?"

"No!" was his first, knee-jerk reaction. He cleared his throat and corrected himself: "I mean- there isn't much to talk about, truthfully. It's nothing so complicated that it would require a whole conversation to understand. I just…"

He looked away, off to the side, but it didn't look like he was seeing anything. It just looked like he was avoiding Reinhard's eyes.

"I just miss him." he murmured.

He opened the door all the way.

"May I come in?"

"Of course."

Reinhard let Joshua pace around the room, sitting patiently in a chair by the window. He was grateful for the carpet. If not for that, Joshua might've made a lot of noise walking around and neither of them wanted to face a sleep-deprived Annika.

Despite Joshua's claim that there was nothing to his sadness, he was gradually becoming more and more talkative.

"I just don't *get* it!" he huffed, making yet another loop around the chair, "I don't understand why- or who, or how. It's driving me insane."

"I don't know either." sighed Reinhard.

"Yes, that's the other thing. Why knights? If you don't know, then I have no idea how we're ever going to find out."

"I'm sure we will, Joshua."

"I am not." he retorted, "I mean, do we have a strategy? Do we have *anything* ?"

"I'm trying to find Felix."

"Yes, but that hasn't been going well, has it?"

He couldn't argue with that one.

"No, it hasn't." he admitted, "But if they've kept him alive for so long, then-"

"-then they need something from him."

"Yes. Essentially, yes."

Joshua made a noise somewhere between pity and exasperation. He stopped dead in his tracks and started retracing his steps: "That could be a lot of things. Sir Felix is an exceptionally powerful magic user, a knight of Lugnica, and a friend to many important people." he recapped.

Reinhard felt a sting of fear in his gut: "Yes, I know. He's also a stubbornly loyal individual. That's both a relief and a worry."

"Are you worried that-"

"Yes."

He cut Joshua off before he could elaborate on his question. Joshua did not insist. He wiped his brow with the cuff of his sleeve and kept walking.

A minute later, he froze.

"I wish I could say I just want answers." he said, flatly, like there was nothing to the statement beside the words that formed it. Or like he couldn't choose an emotion to put behind it.

"But…" he continued, "...that isn't true. It simply isn't. I want answers, yes, but that is the only thing I want that I might have a chance to actually have. I want a lot of things. I want answers, I want justice, I want my brother back! I want him to tell me that he hadn't meant to fall into their trap. That that *goodbye* was a slip-up and nothing more. But I can't have that. I can't have any of that, except answers. So that is the only thing I can cling to."

Reinhard's heavy heart sank even further down into his stomach. He felt sick.

"You can't live only for that."

"What do *you* live for, Reinhard?"

He flinched. He hadn't expected him to flip the question back at him.

"To- protect." was all he could say, "That is the reason for my being. That is all I can be."

Joshua's brow curved up in something terribly similar to pity: "And you say I can't live only for answers."

"You weren't created to live your life like that." he sighed, "But, listen, Joshua, if I said I can clear one of your doubts for you…" he murmured, holding Joshua's wrist between his hands almost unconsciously, "...would that make you feel any better?"

"Yes!" the boy answered, without hesitation and perhaps a bit too loud. He realised his mistake half a second later. His cheeks flushed.

"Hm… yes." he repeated, quietly.

"Alright. Then I will tell you this."

He pressed his thumbs down just a little, just enough to feel the strong, healthy pulse of the veins in the kid's wrist: "Julius did not mean to die."

Joshua flinched.

"He never meant to leave you behind. When he left that night, he knew it was a risk, but he went there intending to save someone, not get himself killed. Of that, you can be sure." he said. His expression softened: "He was too proud of you to leave you behind of his own free will."

The boy's arm shook violently in his grip.

The sea of melancholy turned to something indescribable.

"Please leave." he stuttered, under his breath, "Leave- f- leave for a moment, I-"

Reinhard felt a twinge of panic: "Did I say something wrong?"

"Please, leave!"

His voice was rising. Reinhard retreated, raising his hands in an appeasing gesture: "Alright. Forgive me. I'll see you later."

The door was shut behind him before he had time to look back.

Resigned to return to his room, he found Annika poking her head out from behind her door.

His breath returned all at once in a tired sigh: "Oh, did we wake you? I'm sorry."

"Yeah. You did." she muttered, grumpily, "Do you know what time it is, sir?"

"I'm very sorry."

"No, really. Do you know what time it is? I have no idea."

There was a moment of silence as both their gazes slowly travelled to the ticking clock on the far wall.

"One in the morning." she huffed, "We'd better get back to sleep."

One in the morning.

"Yes, of course. I'm very sorry I woke you."

He couldn't be sure, but he may have heard her mumble something along the lines of *you'd better be* as she retreated into her bedroom.

He couldn't go back to sleep.

Reinhard got no sleep that night, thanks in no small part to the continuous waves of sadness that washed over him, but he didn't leave the room until an acceptable time; that is, about half an hour after Annika got up, at the time she was supposed to make breakfast.

He helped her sometimes, and she didn't ask any questions, except whether or not he'd slept well. If the answer was *no* , and he didn't elaborate, she knew not to pry.

Halfway through folding the batter to complete a pastry, however, he felt a stone in his gut.

He was on duty that day.

He really didn't want to leave for hours after that conversation with Joshua. Maybe it was time to call in a favour.

"Annika?"

"Mh?" she answered, a bit distracted by the pot of bubbling cream in front of her.

"I have a task for you today. You don't have to do it, I'm just… asking."

She raised her brow, her attention now entirely on him: "What is it?"

"I would like you to keep an eye on Joshua, if possible. He isn't… he wasn't doing well last night."

"Yeah, I noticed." she nodded, "I was going to ask you about it, but it was so late…"

"I know. He's just…" he gestured vaguely, "...grieving, you know? And grieving people are… a bit fragile, as I'm sure you know. But I'm on duty today, and I can't-"

"I understand. I'll keep an eye on him."

"Thank you, Annika."

A few more days passed just like that. Joshua's mood was relatively stable as long as he was talking to them, only to drop significantly when he was left alone. He apologised for being rude that night, *profusely* apologised, and Reinhard did the same, over and over, until Annika asked them if they were going to clean that window anytime soon.

They did. Reinhard watched Joshua struggle to wipe away a dark spot on the window frame. From then on, Joshua started helping more and more, until they were less like a master, a guest and a maid, and more like three people sharing a house.

And Joshua was… better, somewhat. He had long conversations with Annika, apparently, anytime Reinhard was away, and, though she didn't tell him exactly what they talked about, he could guess based on their shared past. Much like Annika, the marks of his melancholy were slowly beginning to fade from his posture, from his face, and from the tone in his voice.

He was doing better.

Of course, such things never lasted.

It was on a relatively uneventful evening, as the three of them were busy making dinner together, that something happened.

He didn’t know what it was. A shiver, sudden and brutal, making him drop the knife he’d taken it upon himself to cut the ingredients with. It clattered against the cutting board, and two heads snapped towards him.

“Sir?”

“What’s wrong?”

He shook his head. The shiver seemed to be dancing a jig all over his back.

“Nothing.” he smiled, “Just… a feeling. I got distracted.”

Annika frowned: “No offense, sir, but that doesn’t sound good.”

“It isn’t.” Joshua agreed, “Are you ill? Tired? You were out all day, maybe you should just rest for a bit.”

“Yeah, we can take it from here.” she nodded.

Reinhard waved them off: “Oh, no. I’m not tired. And I would… prefer it, if you didn’t have to use a knife without my supervision.”

“I can heal cuts.” Annika shrugged, “I’ve been doing just fine this entire time. Of course, I agree that Joshua shouldn’t be anywhere near a knife.”

“ *Annika!* "

“No, I’m being honest.” Reinhard smiled, fondly, “I’m not tired and… I don’t know what came over me just then, but I’m not ill, I assure you.”

The kids exchanged a look. They’d been doing it more and more often. Communicating with their eyes. Usually, however, it was reserved for when they agreed on Reinhard lying to them or underplaying whatever was bothering him. Such as that moment.

“If you’re sure of it…” sighed Joshua. They knew better than to insist.

“Of course, I’m-”

Knock knock.

Annika didn’t miss a beat: “Oh, my hands are dirty. Sir Reinhard-”

“I’ll get it.” he sighed. Yes, it was a ploy to get him out of the kitchen, but he wasn’t about to argue with two children about who was going to open the door. Especially not at that time of night. Especially not with that feeling of dread clawing at him.

The shiver returned, more violent than ever, as soon as his hand was on the handle. It was like a feeling of intense numbness. Like his chest had been emptied of all its organs.

And it wasn’t entirely his own, he knew that much.

But what was he going to do?

He ignored it, opening the door to find-

“Felix?”

Chapter 8: Intermission #2

“Blue, come here.”

That wasn’t unusual.

"We need to talk."

That *was* unusual, actually. Still, he sat across from him, waiting for whatever he had to say. His master ruffled his own hair, a completely unnecessary action, given how messy it already was.

"So… ah, this is embarrassing." he mumbled, "I gotta tell you a secret."

"What is it?"

There was a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"Well, you see…" he started, then paused: "Hm. This is more difficult than I anticipated. How do I put this? Ah, hell. I'll just come right out and say it. I lied to you."

He must have misheard. Or not. No, he hadn’t, that insincere apologetic smile was clear. But it was fine. It wouldn’t have been the first time he’d lied, obviously. And he’d forgiven him for the other lie, yes, so what was the issue? Why did he feel like his heart was about to jump out of his chest?

“Lied about what?” he asked.

“A lot of things.” chuckled the boy, “But I assume… the one you’ll want to know about is the first lie I told you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Who did I say I was?”

The sick feeling in the pit of his stomach began to bubble up. Or maybe it was anger. He hadn’t been allowed to be angry lately.

“You’re… you’re the one I swore loyalty to. You’re the one who’s been at my side for so long, I can’t remember a life before you. You’re the one who will bring about the future His Majesty wanted. You’re…” he hesitated, “You’re my friend, Natsuki Subaru.”

The smile on his friend’s face turned into a grin. That was not the face he wanted to see.

“Oh!” Subaru exclaimed, “Oh, is that what I told you? My bad, I completely forgot. Yeah, that’s a lie.”

“What is a lie?”

That came out louder than he’d intended. It didn’t seem to bother Subaru. He laughed. He laughed in his face: “All of it! Every word you just said! I’m not your master, I’ve only known you for a few months, I’ve never even met *His Majesty* , and oh!”

He crossed his arms, casually leaning over the chair to look directly into Felix’s eyes as he shattered the last remaining piece of his heart: “I’m not your friend.”

Felix’s hands were shaking like he’d been electrocuted. It certainly felt like it.

“What?” he repeated, dumbfounded. It was all he could say: “What?”

“Yeah, you *have* no friends now. You killed the last one a while ago.”

“No, I-” he shook his head furiously. The tear that was rolling down his cheek splashed on the arm of the chair instead.

“Yeah, yeah, you did. In cold blood, too! You planned it, every part of it, and you went through with it, and he trusted you the entire time. Oh, I saw you struggle. I saw how badly you wanted to stop him and scream for help. And you did it anyway. No one will ever trust you again after that.” he cackled, “What, you think you can just go back to being a knight? You, with the blood of a fellow knight on your hands? Oh, they’ll never take you back. Sorry, Blue. You’re alone.”

The question changed.

“Why?” he yelled, desperately trying to keep his voice from shaking, “Why?”

Why did you lie?

Why say this now?

Why did you make me kill him?

Why did you make me into this?

Subaru tilted his head to the side: “Why? ‘Cause you were useful, duh. And you were up for grabs, since your actual master kinda…”

He made a gesture not unlike a cloud dispersing: “...vanished.”

“Why?”

“Oh, she got eaten months ago. I’m sure she would’ve protected you, like you wanted. I’m sure she would’ve died before letting me get my hands on you. Which… huh, I guess she kinda had to. But guess what, Blue? I’m not her. I’m not that person you were looking for.”

“Why?”

Through a thick veil of tears, he saw Subaru’s face scrunch up in annoyance: “Ugh, you sound like a broken record. Speak up, for once. You look pathetic.”

He couldn’t breathe.

“Why…” he forced himself to speak without gasping for air, “Why now?”

That was the best he could do.

“Why am I saying all this now, you ask?”

Subaru scratched some dirt out from under his nail. Without even looking at him, he said it like it was: “Because I don’t need you anymore. Duh. Well, I do need you, but not here. I have one last job for you and then you can die.”

He looked up, straight into his eyes, and added: “Like you so clearly want to.”

His expression softened in the cruelest possible way: “It’s okay, Blue. You know, you were actually pretty useful. If this job doesn’t kill you, and you lack the courage, just come to me and I’ll do it for you. Okay? Call it a parting gift.”

"I'm-" he sobbed, "I'm not alone. I'm not-"

Subaru just laughed.

He could barely hear his own voice at that point. Everything sounded muffled, somehow.

Something. He needed something, *anything* to cling to, someplace to go, something to do. He didn't want to die yet. Right?

Not yet, but once that objective was completed…

Felix coughed. The irony of struggling to breathe, wheezing and choking until his hands were numb, did not escape him.

It felt like payback.

"W…" he stuttered, between one desperate gasp for air and the next, "Wh- what-"

"Speak up."

"Wh- what's the job…?"

Subaru smiled. He still looked so kind when he smiled. How?

He crouched next to Felix, running his fingers through his hair. He didn't stop him. It was a guilty reassurance, the only thing he could cling to.

Even if he wasn't really his friend, Subaru still held his strings.

That was the only reason he was able to calm down enough to hear his command.

"Go and tell Reinhard what you did."

Chapter 9: Chapter 9

“Felix?”

He almost hadn’t recognised him. He still looked the same, of course, but there was something frightening in his eyes. Reinhard could just barely make out the pink and red ruffles of a dress he’d never seen before under a heavy maroon cape. The colour was so unusual for him that it almost seemed to reflect on his facial features.

But that was Felix. Alive, apparently unharmed, and right there in front of him.

He didn’t wait for Felix to explain himself. He pulled him to his chest before he could do anything, until he could feel his quiet, rhythmic heartbeat through the cape.

That might have been a little tight.

Felix awkwardly patted him twice on the shoulder: “Ow.” was his only comment, but it was enough.

Reinhard pulled away, never letting go of his shoulders. He all but dragged Felix past the doorway, inside, where it was safe. Only then could he find the words.

“I thought I’d never see you again.”

They were the wrong words. His friend averted his eyes, with the face of someone who’d been punched in the gut.

“And so did I.” he murmured in response.

Reinhard squeezed his shoulders a bit: "Please, tell me everything. Are you hurt? Did they do anything to you?"

Felix's eyes seemed to soften: "You *were* worried, huh?"

"Yes!" he huffed, "Yes, I was worried. Is it true you were with a member of the witch cult?"

He flinched: "What?"

"The-" he paused. Did Felix know about Julius? Sure, he was seen there, but he may have missed the whole thing for all he knew.

"Nevermind." he shook his head: "Sit down. I have to… uh, I have to ask you more questions. I'm sorry."

"Reinhard-"

"Please, sit down."

Felix let himself fall into a chair and, through the sea of all-encompassing numbness he’d been feeling, Reinhard sensed the smallest spark of fear. Something was wrong. Wrong. So *wrong* . He couldn’t find a better word to describe it.

"Felix…" he started, but his voice dropped the moment the first question came to mind: "Were you taken by the witch cult?"

To his surprise, Felix actually answered, looking much calmer than before.

"Not exactly, no. I was with one member and one member only the entire time."

"Why?"

"In his words, I was *useful* ." he shrugged, briefly making air quotes around the word *useful* , only to change his mind and quickly fold his hands back in his lap. The position he'd assumed was clearly defensive, yet he didn't seem to be actively afraid of anything. Why?

No matter.

"Did he take you after the White Whale fight?"

"Yes."

"Did anyone see it happen?"

"I can’t remember."

"Where did he take you?"

"Many different places. He doesn't have a base."

Reinhard shivered. The most difficult question was right there on the tip of his tongue. He could feel it biting into the corners of his mouth, softening his tone as it came out.

"Felix, what did he do to you?"

Felix gave him a joyless smile.

"Not much, actually." he said, "He just used me for as long as he needed and then let me go."

Reinhard stood up quickly, only to steady himself upon seeing his friend flinch at the sudden movement: "I'm sorry. Used you for what?"

Felix put up his hands in a placating gesture: "Healing, mostly. Calm down."

"I can’t *calm down* , Felix!" he protested, taking the hands he still held up in his, "You were gone for so long, I was afraid I would find your c-"

He cut himself off.

Your corpse.

Felix seemed to understand him anyway. His tail flicked shamefully: "I'm sorry you were so worried. He didn’t hurt me. You can… please, breathe. You're going to pass out."

He was right. His breaths were starting to become short and irregular and, though that was unlikely to hurt him, it was certainly not doing his frightened friend any favours.

Reinhard took in a deep breath. It came out a tired sigh.

"I'm sorry." he said. There were so many things he could have followed it up with.

I'm sorry I let him take you away.

I'm sorry I couldn't find you.

I'm sorry I was doing other things.

I'm sorry I can't reassure you now that you're back.

He didn’t say any of them out loud.

Felix's eyes seemed to soften: "There's nothing to be sorry for."

"I disagree."

"You don't get a say in it, Reinhard. I've already forgiven you for all of it."

He squeezed Reinhard’s hands a little: "I can tell you mean it when you say you're sorry, but I would have forgiven you no matter what. I don’t hold you responsible for any of this. I need you to know that I was never angry with you, and that I consider you my friend. I love you dearly. I'm sorry you don't see that. I need you to see that. Can you do that for me, please?"

It was so clearly meant to reassure him, but there was a tinge of desperation behind his words that made Reinhard want to hold him tight and never let go.

It just sounded… final.

He held Felix's hands a little closer to himself: "Why does this sound like a goodbye?"

"It isn’t." Felix chuckled, "It's a *hello* . I have a lot of other things to say before we can ever part ways."

"You say that like you know when that's going to happen. Felix, do you know something?"

A long pause.

"Well, now you're just being silly." his friend grinned, but even that smile lacked its usual shine.

Reinhard’s heart skipped a beat. His hands were shaking. Why were his hands shaking?

"Felix…" he pleaded, "Felix, if you know something… if you need help, please, I'm begging you, tell me what it is. I will not let this happen again. I will die twice over before I let him touch you again. So please, I-"

He gasped when a drop of warm water splashed on their joined hands. Felix's back was curved way down so he couldn’t see his face, but he was shaking with barely contained sobs.

"You… idiot. You beautiful idiot." he murmured, "You're so kind to me. You're so good to me. I don’t ever want to say goodbye to you. I don’t want to… I'm…"

Reinhard pulled him to his feet and drew him into another hug. The sea of numbness lit up with a brief spark of joy, only for it to be drowned out by a current of… shame?

Still, Felix didn’t pull away. He let Reinhard hold him to his chest and rock back and forth a little as though he was cradling a child.

Felix calmed down surprisingly quickly, in all honesty. In a matter of minutes, he was well enough to push him away, his eyes dry and his heart once again dead in his chest.

"I'm sorry." he said, flatly, "I was being selfish there. I was… I almost broke a promise. I don’t want to do that."

"A promise?"

What promise could he possibly have made regarding Reinhard and hugs?

Felix sat back down: "Yeah. An important vow I took a while ago."

"What was the vow?" asked Reinhard, kneeling in front of him like before.

His friend looked down at him with something like regret in his eyes: "I vowed I would tell you what happened the night Julius was killed."

His heart jumped up and then sank into his gut. So he did know. And he was right there.

Reinhard couldn’t imagine being there. Part of it was that he didn't know what had happened, of course, but part of it was that he didn't even want to picture himself watching his friend die and being helpless to stop it. Helplessness wasn’t a feeling Reinhard was too familiar with.

His voice dropped to the most soothing tone he could manage: "You don't have to tell me now. You know that, right?"

"I do. I can’t stand to keep it to myself anymore."

"Then, I'm listening."

He was ashamed of that brief moment of relief.

Felix closed his eyes for a few seconds, breathing in deeply, and only reopened them once his exercise was done.

"He was poisoned." he started, "That's all it was. I don’t know what scenarios you've been making up in your head, but this is all that happened. He was down on the floor before he ever knew what hit him. It didn’t take more than a minute or two."

Reinhard almost breathed a sigh of relief, but Felix wasn’t done talking.

"I was… there. I didn’t help him. I wanted to. I was hoping he would go to sleep without realising what was happening, but he didn’t."

His tone was becoming more and more mechanical. Reinhard knew he would have struggled to talk otherwise.

When Felix hesitated to continue, he couldn’t keep himself from asking the other question that had been on his mind: "Felix, did they kill him to get to you?"

Felix flinched.

When he spoke again, that previously mechanical voice was trembling with emotion: "No." he whispered, "No, he wanted to kill him to get to *you* ."

Chapter 10: Chapter 10

It took him too long to respond. Much longer than anyone should. The words echoed in his mind, louder every second, crashing and bumping against his skull. He gritted his teeth, involuntarily.

There was only one way to read what Felix had just told him.

To get to me.

Me.

I'm involved.

My fault.

"No, it's not." Felix frowned.

Reinhard flinched. He'd said that out loud.

"I-"

"Reinhard, no."

Felix addressed him in the same way one would talk to a misbehaving dog. His brows knitted together, his tone firm, but no venom behind his words. No hatred behind his eyes.

He sighed heavily: "You're too quick on taking blame. It wasn't your fault. I need you to know that."

He set his hand on the side of Reinhard's head, and the voices faded a little.

They grew quieter and quieter, until the last one crawled out through his throat: "If I wasn't there-"

"Reinhard."

The voice died.

"Don't you see what's wrong with what you're telling me?" Felix asked him.

He really didn't. He shook his head.

"You've jumped straight to blame without even questioning why someone would want to hurt you. Do you think you deserve to be hurt?"

His eyes looked infinitely sad when he asked him that, and yet, the numbness didn't subside. Reinhard squeezed the one hand he was still holding once again: "No, but-"

He couldn't go on. There was nothing he could say to that. He didn't think he deserved it, necessarily, but he was no stranger to the idea of having enemies.

Though having enemies that would do something as low as targeting someone else was rather… new. He hated it. He had never been so afraid. He felt his head fall forward until it was nearly touching his knees.

Felix's free hand brushed against his shoulder.

"You don't deserve any of this." he murmured, "There was nothing you could have done. I need you to know that."

He was drawing little circles into his back. Everything should have been reassuring. Felix's words should have been a comfort to him, and he could tell that he meant them.

If only he hadn't been radiating that terrifying numbness the entire time, it might have worked.

"Felix," he murmured, "Felix, something is wrong. Tell me what's wrong. Please."

"You don't seem to be in any condition to hear it."

"It doesn't matter. It won't get better. Not when I can feel what you're feeling."

He felt Felix flinch. Apparently, he'd forgotten about Divine Empathy as well. Good to know. Maybe he would stop denying the obvious.

"I forgot about that." Felix mumbled, "Well, it seems we'll be stuck for a while, then. I'm not sure I can… I mean, you're… hmm."

When he looked up again, Reinhard found him staring absently out the window, pondering something he was apparently not yet ready to say. Something had gone very wrong. Something had been done to him, clearly, no matter what he said or even what he thought. Maybe he hadn't even realised how much he'd been hurt, but Reinhard had only ever felt that kind of numbness coming from people in their darkest hour. People who could no longer recognise the value of their life.

He wanted, so badly, for Felix to just be his old self again, but there was something in the way and, whatever it may have been, it had reduced him to something nearly unrecognisable. His look and his words may have been genuine, but something ugly lurked just underneath.

"Felix." he pleaded, "You're scaring me."

That struck something. A weak, soft spot somewhere in Felix's indifferent façade. For a moment, when his friend looked back at him, he saw a look reserved for someone else reflected in his eyes. Then it was gone.

Felix's hands were shaking again: "Right. I… I wasn't done telling you what… what happened. My bad."

"Oh, no. Not yet." he retorted, "Not until I know what is troubling you."

"We'll get to it."

"Felix-"

" *We'll get to it.* " he repeated, almost coldly, "Why is it so important? Why can you wait for answers on Julius, but not on me?"

Reinhard's voice dropped: "Because Julius is dead and I can't protect him anymore."

It hurt to admit, but there was no way around it. He knew it all too well: there was nothing he could do anymore. He couldn't let the dead get in the way of the living.

Before Felix could find the words to answer him, he pressed him with a question of his own: "Why is it so hard to believe that I want to protect you, too?"

The numbness engulfed every inch of his heart.

Dead-eyed and dead-hearted, Felix looked him straight in the eyes and gave his reason.

"Because I'm the one who killed him."

His first thought was that he had misheard.

His second thought was that Felix had misspoken.

His third thought was that that simply could not be all there was to it.

“You didn’t.” he stuttered, “Y… you couldn’t have-”

“Yes, I did.” said Felix, “I put poison in his drink the moment he looked away. I watched him fall down and choke on the floor. And I did nothing about it.”

“But, surely-”

“I didn’t have a knife to my back or anything. They told me to do it and I did it. That’s all there was to it.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No, it wasn’t.”

“Yes, it was.”

He sensed a spark of shame, just enough to give him hope.

Reinhard felt his heart racing without knowing when it had started going so fast. A lie. It must have been a lie, right? If not a lie, a trick by the cultist to make him believe it was true. If not that, an accident. If not that…

“I’m a bit insulted that you think I’m lying.” Felix sighed. There was no emotion behind his words.

“You must be.” whispered Reinhard, “He… someone tricked you. Someone made you think-”

Felix stood up in front of him and reached for something tied to the ribbon around his waist. Without a word, he pulled on the ribbon and grabbed Reinhard’s wrist, before placing the hilt of a familiar sword in his hand.

“Still don’t believe I was there?”

It was Julius’s sword, without a doubt. The one he always had with him. The one they hadn’t been able to find in the swamp and had assumed someone or something had taken.

Felix wouldn’t have taken it from his corpse in a million years.

“You wouldn’t-” he stuttered, a last attempt to make Felix admit that he was innocent.

He did no such thing.

“Dammit, Reinhard!” he growled, uncharacteristically. He found no resistance when he grabbed the swordsman by his shoulders to yell in his face: “Stop defending me! Stop protecting me!! If you want this murderer brought to justice, then here! I gave you a sword, I gave you the murderer; so kill him like you wanted to until only minutes ago! You can’t change your mind just because it’s me. You can’t spare me just because it’s me. You can’t give me special treatment here. I am a murderer, so punish me like you would a murderer. Please, Reinhard. Please!”

“No.” Reinhard shook his head. It was so hard to breathe.

“Please.”

“No, no, no…”

“Reinhard!”

“No.”

“Why not? *Why not?* ” Felix shouted, “You’d be doing me a favour. You’d be doing yourself a favour. You feel what I’m feeling, right? So make it stop, or we’re both just going to suffer. Just think of what I did, okay? Just picture it.”

“No, I-”

“Picture it! I had to see it, and I hate my own face in the mirror. If you see it, you’ll hate me too, and then you don’t have to suffer!”

“No, please-”

“Just see it! See what I saw! I can tell you everything so you’ll see it too!”

“Stop it.”

“Dammit, Reinhard, just hate me already!” he exploded, “Hate me! Hate me like I do, or at least stop caring like everyone else did! Stop protecting a murderer. Stop trying to make excuses for it. I wasn’t forced and I wasn’t tricked. I killed Julius, and I did it just because they told me to!”

Crash!

Annika tilted the tray back into position, but the damage was done. A glass had fallen, covering the carpet and the bottom of her apron in shards of glass and splashes of red wine.

But that wasn’t the problem.

Just behind her, Joshua stood still, with the face of someone waiting for death under the rubble of a crumbling building.

That was when, in the infinite numbness, the spark of shame exploded into a wildfire.

Chapter 11: Chapter 11

A burning shame exploded in Felix's chest, so overwhelming that Reinhard couldn't stand up in time to make an excuse, a reassurance, *anything* that would help get that look off of Joshua's face.

He couldn't move before the boy did.

One step, two steps, slow and trembling, the kind of steps he'd seen injured men take. Injured. *Injured* was a good word. Cut, ripped apart, hurt in the deepest sense of the word.

Felix stood up straight. The shame tinged with some sort of muffled version of what joy might have felt like before he'd been taken. When Reinhard looked back at him, he was smiling.

"Hello."

That was all he said, almost sweetly, but with nothing behind the eyes. His tone was the same as that of a caretaker consoling a child, but his words were as far from that as it got when he spoke up again.

"I've been waiting for you." he said, "I've been waiting for someone."

Joshua didn't answer. His eyes, from glazed and distant, became gradually more present as they filled with tears. With every step, that overwhelming, sickening wave of despair got stronger, until Reinhard struggled to stand under that crushing weight in his chest.

He put himself between them: "Joshua. Joshua, look at me."

He didn't. His eyes seemed to stare straight through him, like he wasn't even there.

His leg twitched, a tell-tale sign.

Attack.

Reinhard was prepared. He caught the boy easily when he threw himself forward in rage and, though every hit landed, he could hardly feel them. He closed his arms around Joshua: "Stop! Stop it! It's not worth it, Joshua, it's not worth it, he's stronger than you. Please, stop." he pleaded, pulling him as close as he could hold him without hurting him.

"Let me go!" the boy demanded.

"No."

"Let go! Let go of me!"

"Not until you've calmed down."

Joshua was deaf to his every plea and reassurance, and the anger had quickly turned to pure desperation; even as he repeatedly tried to kick out Reinhard's legs from under him, his arms clung to his back and his face, soaked with tears, was buried in his chest. He was screaming in a way that must have been hurting his throat, but he gave no sign of stopping. Reinhard didn't even know what he was saying anymore to try and comfort him. He did hear someone shout.

Annika.

What was she saying?

" *The sword!* " she screamed.

The sword. The sword?

It had been in Reinhard’s hand before. Where was it? He glanced behind him in a panic, only to find Felix standing up from where the sword had fallen in the turmoil. He held it within his hands with a care that wasn’t there before. Almost religiously.

Reinhard cursed himself. He couldn’t pay attention to both Felix and Joshua. All he could do was turn his eyes to his friend and curve his back a little to curl around Joshua.

“Don’t.” he pleaded.

He wasn’t sure who he was talking to anymore.

Joshua froze.

“Don’t, what?” Felix gave him that sweet, empty smile again, “What are you afraid of, Reinhard?”

Reinhard turned back to look at Joshua, but he couldn’t see his face. It was buried in the lapels of his coat, just barely peeking out from over his arm. That was when it occurred to him.

Joshua wasn't paying attention to Reinhard anymore, and Felix was closer, much closer, holding the sword by the blade, barely an inch away from his chest.

Who had the handle?

That was when he realised he could only feel one hand on his back.

A moment too late.

Felix didn’t let go of the blade. He accompanied it, gladly, as it plunged into his chest, ripping through the ruffles of that strange dress, through smooth skin and muscle, sliding between his ribs like it was always meant to be there.

It wasn’t.

It wasn’t meant to be there!

Reinhard lunged forward, still carrying Joshua, and the sword was out of its cursed sheath again. He spared a glance for the boy, quiet and frozen stiff from shock in his arms, but that was all the attention he could give him after he heard the terrifying *thud* of a fallen body.

Glimpses of blue lips and glassy eyes flashed before his eyes as he turned back to Felix, nothing but two words repeating in his mind, over and over: *not again not again not again not-*

Red again. Such an unusual colour for him. Red, all over his chest, a blooming flower of blood.

Reinhard knelt next to him, despite the overwhelming maelstrom of emotions that pressed down on him from all sides: "Felix, Felix, Felix…" he murmured, "Heal yourself. You can heal yourself. Heal yourself."

Felix just shook his head with a smile.

Reinhard pressed his hands down on the wound, though the smell of blood and the slick feeling it left on his fingers made him sick.

"Heal yourself!!"

That was meant to be an order. It came out a trembling request.

Not that an order would have worked.

Reinhard turned back to the children behind him: "Annika!!" he called, "Help him!"

"B…" she stuttered, "But I- I've never-"

"Just help him, do *something* , please!!"

He saw her hesitate before stepping in the puddle of blood. He saw her face lose its colour as soon as she was close enough to see the wound. He saw her struggle to put her hands forward and cast a healing spell.

Shamefully, at that moment, he didn't care.

The spell wasn't working. The wound gave no sign of closing and the stain under them just kept expanding. Annika visibly began to panic; her breaths became shorter and she blinked away the traces of a tear forming in her eye. She flinched when Felix grabbed her hand to push her away.

"Leave it alone." he told her, quietly, too quietly for a healthy person, too firmly for a dying person, "You're going to exhaust yourself."

Annika shook her head, even though her face was going paler by the second as her eyes kept flitting back and forth between the wound and the bloodied hand on her wrist.

"No." she stuttered, "You… I won't stop. You'll have t- you'll have to-"

"-heal yourself." Reinhard murmured.

Felix's twisted happiness in front of him, Annika's blinding panic on his left, Joshua's numb shock behind him, every emotion in the room was crushing him until he could barely hear his own voice. His vision became a tunnel, focused entirely on that broken smile. That wasn't the face of someone about to die.

Felix shook his head again. With his free hand, he reached for Reinhard's.

"Leave it alone." he whispered again. Reinhard had a sinking suspicion that was as high as his voice would be able to go with only one lung intact.

He was just about to answer when a cracked, yet somewhat firm voice rose behind them.

"You disgust me."

It was strange to hear Joshua say something so harsh. But he didn't stop there.

"You disgust me. Hypocrite. You merciless hypocrite." he said, flatly, with the kind of calm that only the most furious of people could have.

Felix didn't look surprised.

"I'm sorry." he smiled.

"No, you're not." Joshua shook his head, without ever looking away from the dying knight, "You have insulted us and you continue to insult us. How dare you?" his voice cracked, "The nerve you have… I have never been so cruelly mocked as now."

It was only when the first tear fell from Joshua's eye that Felix's smile faded.

"How… have I…?" he whispered, blinking the haze away from his eyes.

Reinhard almost sobbed in relief when that strange, twisted happiness finally began to crumble. It was like a spell had been broken. Felix gave off a sting of panic as he tried and failed to sit up and look Joshua in the eyes: "How?" he demanded.

Joshua gave him a look like one would give to the worst kind of criminal.

“That night, my brother left to save you.” he said, "And now, you come to me to die."

Felix stared back with empty eyes, but his pulse rushed under Reinhard’s fingers. The shame ignited, once again, finally accompanied by something else.

He let his head fall back.

The wound began to close.

Chapter 12: Chapter 12

What Reinhard had felt beyond the shame, he realised much later, was something like love. Affection, nostalgia, fondness, maybe.

A lot of regret.

He pulled his friend up into something like an awkward hug. It wasn't a hug, exactly; he didn't intend for it to be that. He just needed something to tell him it wasn't too late again. Felix seemed to pick up on that. He didn't protest as he continued to heal the relatively superficial wound on his chest. It was straining his consciousness, that much was clear from his slow blinking and how his arm sank further and further down until it was resting on his stomach. He didn't try to stop Annika from helping him that time, but maybe he was simply too drowsy for that.

Eventually, when the deep wound from before had become nothing more than a cut, he lost consciousness entirely.

At least he was alive.

As soon as Felix had taken care of his wound, Annika stood on trembling legs and ran from the room, bumping into a cabinet on the way out. The almost green shade on her cheeks and the way her stomach spasmed under her apron made it clear why.

Reinhard couldn't be sure, busy as he was tending to the long, surprisingly clean cut on Felix's chest, but he thought he'd seen Joshua follow her.

And then he was alone.

He let himself rest for just a moment, once the cut was taken care of. Just a moment. Just to catch a breath and thank anything and anyone that might have saved him from having to report yet another murdered friend.

After that, though, the reality of the situation hit him and he was kneeling with his forehead to the ground again, curled up like a child, trying to make sense of everything. It was too much.

Someone was out to hurt him.

Felix had killed Julius.

Felix had tried to get Reinhard and then Joshua to kill *him.*

Joshua had convinced him not to die, somehow.

There were too many holes in the story. Too much information he was missing. Dreading and at the same time looking forward to that conversation, Reinhard gathered Felix's unconscious form in his arms. The floor was no place for him.

On his way to the closest unoccupied bedroom, he could clearly hear the sound of someone retching. He felt a pang of guilt, but there would be time for that conversation.

More specifically, there would be time for it after Felix was properly cleaned up and resting.

He scrubbed all traces of blood off of his friend's chest, picked it from between his fingers and the tips of his hair, wiped it from the corner of his mouth.

He didn't expect him to wake up for a few hours at least. That meant he had time to deal with the aftermath of what had happened.

Annika had stopped heaving, by the time he reached the bathroom, but that might have been because she had nothing left in her stomach. Pale as a corpse, she sat almost lifelessly against the wall. Joshua sat silently beside her, in the exact same position.

When she saw Reinhard, she turned her head away, wiping at the corner of her mouth with her wrist. Her sleeve had been rolled all the way up to her elbow.

"Are you alright?" he asked them. Not the best question, as they let him know with a single look, but it was the best he could do.

"Better now." Annika nodded, "I'm sorry, I… didn't help much, did I?"

"I don't know a lot about magic." he answered, sincerely, "But you certainly did the best you could have done. Thank you."

He bowed his head to her but, as soon as she looked back at him, her face went green again.

"Sure." she forced herself to say.

He frowned: "Are you ill? Did you overuse your gate?"

"No, I j… I just- I don't-" she stuttered. She turned her face away again, but it looked like embarrassment that time.

"I don't like… blood." she mumbled, "I really don't."

He looked down. He hadn't realised, until that moment, just how bloody his coat was. As she mentioned it, a few things occurred to him. Firstly, the front of his coat and most of his sleeve was almost entirely covered in relatively fresh blood. Secondly, despite it making her sick, Annika had stepped in to help anyway.

He felt his face lose some of its colour: "Oh. Oh my." he murmured, "I'm very sorry. Let me…"

He made a run for his bedroom, thankfully very close to that bathroom, and abandoned his white coat in favour of a longer black coat. He could wash them later. He certainly wasn't going to make Annika do it.

She seemed to appreciate the change of clothes when he came back.

"You didn't have to do that." she murmured, "I think… I should get cleaned up, first."

"Take the evening off." Reinhard nodded, "Do you want any dinner? I'll bring it to you."

"I don't think I can stomach it." she said, frankly, "I'll just… rest, I think."

"Of course."

He snuck a glance at Joshua, sitting in total silence beside her. He hadn't said a single word the whole time. He was just staring down at the floor with a tight expression.

"I think we should all rest now." Reinhard added, helping the maid to her feet, "You can go to the other bathroom and wash up."

She nodded and left the room on trembling legs.

Reinhard turned to the only person left in there: "Joshua?"

For the first time since the start of the conversation, the boy looked up at him. There was everything and nothing behind those eyes.

"I think you and I ought to have a conversation." Joshua told him, flatly.

Reinhard's stomach sank.

"I agree, we should." he nodded, putting his hands up in a placating gesture, "But are you sure you want to have that conversation right now?"

Joshua looked up at him. He blinked once. Twice. He glanced off to the side as he always did when he felt nervous or overwhelmed in a conversation. Finally, he pulled himself up to stand in front of Reinhard again.

"No." he admitted, "I don't."

Reinhard was alone for the rest of the evening.

He kept himself busy, mopping up trails of red droplets going from the parlour to a guest bedroom, scrubbing away reddish brown footprints running from the carpet to the bathroom, stuffing dirty clothes, carpets and sheets into basins full of cold water so the blood would come off.

By the time he was done, it was past two in the morning.

Tired in the deepest sense of the word, he dragged a chair to Felix's bedside and fell asleep before everything that had happened could awaken the swarm of thoughts running through his mind.

Deep in his dreams, he could have sworn someone was comforting him.

Chapter 13: Chapter 13

In his dreams, Reinhard felt a hand on his back. It ran gently along the line of his shoulders, letting him revel in the somewhat guilty comfort of allowing someone to help him.

He wasn’t entirely sure who that *someone* was. He only knew that they loved him.

"Thank you. You're doing well." said the presence, and the dream faded.

He woke up less than two hours later, unfortunately. The presence in his dreams, at least, left him feeling much more prepared for whatever may come.

The first thing, in fact, came very soon. Two or three minutes after Reinhard woke up, Felix stirred in his sleep. He wasn’t awake yet, but he'd moved. That was more than enough to give him hope.

The second movement wasn’t as promising. Felix shifted uncomfortably, almost curling in on himself, his face tight with pain or maybe fear. Neither of those was good.

"Felix?" Reinhard murmured. No reaction. Still not awake, then.

But that expression just tugged at something in his heart.

"Felix?" he repeated, not expecting an answer. His hand moved before he could stop himself, closing around his friend's forearm in the most reassuring gesture he could manage at that moment. It worked, somehow. Felix's breathing evened out almost immediately afterwards.

It was less than an hour before he actually woke up, and Reinhard held his arm the entire time.

When he did wake up, it was without fanfare. He just opened his eyes.

He looked up at the ceiling, to one side, then the other, at Reinhard’s hand on his arm, and finally into his eyes.

"That was real." he whispered.

It wasn’t a question.

Reinhard smiled apologetically: "You looked frightened. I figured I should find a way to show you I was there."

"I'm sorry. It wasn’t you."

"Mh?"

"In the dream. I didn’t recognise you."

"Oh. Well, that's alright." Reinhard chuckled, though his heart sank just a little, "Who was it, then?"

Felix looked into his eyes and, with disarming sincerity, answered: "I don't know."

They didn't speak for some time. Felix turned his head away and went quiet. Any attempt at conversation on either side fell flat.

"How long have I been out?"

"Only a few hours."

Silence.

"Is the nightgown yours?"

"I just found it."

Silence.

"Are you comfortable there?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

Silence.

Apparently, they only needed the right prompt. Reinhard was the one who found it.

"There was something missing in your story." he frowned.

Felix took on an uncharacteristically worried expression: "Was there?"

Anxiety was coming off of him in waves, but there was something like hope underneath. That was how Reinhard knew he'd struck gold.

He leaned forward without even thinking about it: "Yes. You said the reason you did what you did was simply that you were told to."

"That's it."

"No, it isn't. Who gave you that order and why did you follow it? That's my question."

"That's two questions." Felix pointed out, unamused.

"Then answer them both."

"Okay."

Surprisingly, he gave no resistance. It was most likely because he knew when to cut his losses and admit defeat.

"The one who gave me that order…" he started, raising his index finger to indicate that he was answering the first question, "...was the cultist you said I was seen with."

Reinhard's heart jumped.

Felix raised another finger: "And the reason I listened to him is that he lied to me. He convinced me he was my master. But, Reinhard, I want to make this perfectly clear,"

He looked up at Reinhard with a grave look in his eyes: "...I made the choice to follow that order. At any point throughout that plan, I could have disobeyed without any consequences to me that I would consider to be worth more than Julius's life. So yes, I was tricked, but I am guilty of everything I told you. I want you to understand that I am guilty, and I knew exactly what I was doing. I can't stop you if you want to forgive me, but don't you dare dismiss that fact. Am I being clear?"

He was. He was being very clear. Reinhard couldn't bring himself to say that, though. All he could do was nod.

The words only came to him long after silence fell again, longer than any acceptable answer should take: "What I don't understand is how a stranger was able to trick you into thinking he was your master."

"Frankly, I'm not sure of that, myself." said Felix, "I wasn't able to get that out of him. I only know he took advantage of the memories I've been missing since the fight against

the White Whale. I *did* have a master, I know that much." he added, quietly.

Silence.

"He said…" Felix continued, with an uncharacteristic hesitancy, "...that she, my real master, was uh… eaten. I assume that's why there was a vacant spot that he was able to fill."

"It makes sense, but…"

"I know."

"What?"

"I know you think there was some ulterior motive or manipulation." Felix sighed, "Some other reason why I followed his order. There isn't. He told me to kill Julius, so I did. That was all there was to it, and I don't want you to go making excuses for me. Okay?"

Reinhard looked away.

Not okay, as a matter of fact. *Making excuses* wasn't quite the expression he had in mind, but he understood what Felix was trying to say. Still, he wasn't quite ready to give up.

"Not yet." he said, "I'm sorry to ask you this, but I would like you to tell me everything that happened. Maybe you haven't realised it, Felix, but something happened. He did something to you. I know this, because you're entirely unpredictable now; you're so different from before that I can't pick apart anything you say or do like I could before. The last time I saw you, I was at least able to read your face. Now, every emotion I sense coming from you is…" he gestured vaguely with his hands, "...muffled. I don't know how to explain it, but I don't think I need to. After all, if I'm feeling them, so are you. So I want you to tell me everything, *everything* , every ugly detail of what happened, because I need to know what happened to you and you're not giving me enough to do that. Please. Tell me everything."

Felix broke eye contact the moment he mentioned his emotions. Something had moved in his heart.

He looked almost ashamed.

"Okay." he nodded, brushing his hand against his eye, "I'll tell you all I can remember."

Reinhard shifted in his chair and got ready to listen.

"I don't remember all that much of when I was first taken in, actually. I was… scattered. Yeah, that's a good word. *Scattered.* I had bits and pieces of myself and then a whole lot of nothing."

Felix took a break after that. He shifted in the bed, making time to find the right words to explain himself.

"The first thing I remember clearly is swearing my loyalty to him." he continued, "I cried, I think. Back then, I thought I'd finally found those missing pieces of myself. Hah." he chuckled, bitterly, "I don't know how he knew everything he told me. That's what got me, I think. He knew so many things he shouldn't have been able to know. I figured there could be no way he was lying."

That was suspicious. Why *did* the cultist know so many things? Some kind of spell, perhaps. Reinhard once again cursed his lack of magical knowledge.

Felix pressed on: "Either way, that wasn't too long ago. He kind of kept me at arm's length after that, but I didn't go with him everywhere. For example, I didn't follow him to

the Archbishop of Greed's mansion."

Reinhard could almost feel his ears perk up at that: "Wait, what?"

"Yes." Felix nodded, "The one who killed the Archbishop of Greed was the Bowel Hunter, Elsa Granhiert. He allied himself with her quite some time before I was ever in the picture. There's also another assassin with him, a mabeast user by the name of Meili Portroute. You might want to keep an eye out for that."

"But wait, they told me that-"

"-it was Margrave Mathers, I know. That is false. He was nowhere near us at any time, I think. I've never met him in person after the royal selection." said Felix.

"So, it wasn't him?"

"No."

"But he took credit for it."

"Yes."

"And the cultist had no objection to it?"

Felix gave him an almost pitying look: " *The cultist* asked him to take credit. He's been helping him throughout the entire royal selection."

He paused and frowned at him: "Reinhard, you look pale."

He was probably right. Reinhard felt sick. Just *sick* . He let himself fall forward until his forehead touched his knees. He reached out again, meeting Felix's hand halfway.

His voice cracked: "That was why he wouldn't help me find you."

A strange wave of relief washed over him. As Felix held his hand in turn, he could almost *feel* his friend smile.

"You really were looking for me." he murmured.

Reinhard wasn't quite sure when he'd sprung forward to grab his shoulders. He was even less sure of when he'd pulled him to his chest.

And he only knew he was crying when Felix pointed it out.

Chapter 14: Chapter 14

Reinhard was acutely aware that it was probably best to act as soon as possible against the Margrave. He was also aware that leaving everyone home alone after the madness of the previous day was a risk he may not even need to take. The man probably didn’t know Felix had told him everything.

And, speaking of Felix, that was possibly his biggest, most selfish reason to postpone that confrontation. *Selfish* was a good word. To put it simply, he never wanted to let Felix out of his sight again. Ever. He felt like, at that point, if anything else were to happen to him, he wouldn’t be able to forgive himself.

But, even then, even as much as he wanted to keep an eye on him, he owed someone a conversation before he could ever leave the house. And he suspected having said conversation with Felix in the room wouldn't be the best idea. That was how he found himself staring at the guest room door at eight in the morning with a tray of tea in his hands, hesitating to knock. For at least five minutes straight.

Just when he had found it in himself to knock, the door clicked open.

"I heard you walking outside." mumbled Joshua, "Were you ever going to knock?"

He was being just a bit impolite. Never a good sign, in his experience. That was when it occurred to Reinhard that perhaps he wasn’t as ready to talk as he would have liked.

"I was just about to." he smiled. Technically not a lie.

Joshua sighed: "Say what you must."

"Thank you. Tea?"

He hesitated.

"Yes, please."

They sat at a writing desk, across from one another; not the best place to have tea, but it worked well enough. Joshua had given him permission to make his case, but it took him nearly half a cup of his tea to get there.

When he was starting to sense the impatience coming off of him even without Divine Empathy, Reinhard finally relented: "I didn't know."

Joshua blinked.

"Well, of course you didn't." he murmured, after a long pause, "You wouldn’t have acted the way you did if you had known."

"I just worried that…"

"Don't. I'm…"

He paused. Reinhard could hardly believe it when he sensed a pang of shame coming from him. Why?

"I'm sorry." Joshua forced out, "The way I behaved yesterday is… shameful, to say the least. Disgraceful."

" *What?* "

"I didn't mean to-" he stuttered, "I j… he put the sword in my hands and I c- and I couldn't see anything anymore, I couldn't- I don't know what happened, but I'm…"

"Joshua!" Reinhard hurried to kneel next to the boy, "No, what are you saying? No one blames you for acting out. Do you think anyone would have been capable of staying calm in your situation? I'm just glad you didn't get hurt."

Joshua knit his brows together in that painfully familiar way: "Yes, *I* didn't. But-"

"I couldn't keep you and Felix safe at the same time, and I am sorry for that. My failure is in no way your fault."

"You're n…" he blinked, "You didn't realise it? It *is* my fault."

"No, it-"

"I stabbed him!"

Reinhard's heart sank. He'd suspected that, given that the sword had been in Joshua's hand last, given that he'd felt one of the boy's hands leave his back, given that strange calm that had overcome him only moments before Felix had been injured. To have that confirmation was yet another little weight added to his chest. But still…

"I know." he said, softly, "And Felix helped you, didn't he?"

That caught him off-guard: "I- yes, but-"

"I don't think you not taking that sword would have changed much." he continued, "I don't think anyone could have stopped him, at that moment. There are times when… when, just for a single moment, your control slips. Everything builds up on your shoulders and the universe is just not in your favour. If, for a second, your darkest wishes and his aligned, I can't really blame either of you for what happened. He doesn't blame you either, you know? Besides, you're the one who convinced him to live, don't forget that; if it weren't for you, he might've…"

He shook his head to dispel that image: "Regardless. Right now, what matters is that he's going to recover and we're going to find the one who was truly responsible for…" he paused, "...all of this, I suppose."

Joshua didn't look convinced at all, but went with it anyway: "Right. How do you plan on doing that?"

There it was. The difficult question.

"The first step is trying to get information out of Margrave Mathers." he said, "That is, unless we can find the Archbishop without him. That would be preferable."

"Isn't the Margrave very powerful?" Joshua frowned, "Frankly, it worries me a bit. You are playing a dangerous chess game and your opponent hasn't lost many pieces yet. What if he becomes more dangerous?"

A good concern, but…

"The sooner I can draw the mastermind out, the sooner this will be over." Reinhard murmured.

He wanted it to be over. He wanted nothing more than for it all to be over. He couldn't think of any other goal at that moment, nothing at all except *ending it* and *keeping everyone safe* . Unfortunately, if he'd failed so many already, he didn't have much hope for a happy ending at that point. That might have been because it would never be a happy ending no matter what; there could be no perfect ending for anyone there, because there was no one, at that point, who hadn't lost something important.

The most he could hope to do was ensure they wouldn't lose anything else.

Joshua's eyes seemed to glaze over a little.

"Good plan." he said, flatly.

Joshua didn’t have much else to say. After that, he'd shut down again, answering every question with one or two syllables at most.

Reinhard couldn’t really do much except leave him alone for the time being. He was probably feeling a little overwhelmed, and who could blame him?

He decided to check in on Annika too, but she wasn't in her room. Downstairs, he found a brief note saying she'd gone to the market. He frowned. The last time he'd seen her, she could barely keep her head straight. Was it really okay for her to be out again so soon?

He didn’t have time to ponder that. There was a knock at the door.

Maybe she was back already.

He opened the door, ready to explain to the maid that he would have preferred it if she'd taken the day off, only to find a young woman in front of her. A white and purple hood covered the top of her face, but she looked oddly familiar to him.

He gave her his best polite smile.

"How can I help you?"

The girl looked around and pulled her hood down.

"May I come in, please?" asked Lady Emilia.

Chapter 15: Intermission #3

"I have a job for you."

Elsa looked up from the knife she'd been sharpening: "Oh? How sudden."

He had a certain tendency to space out. Just then, he had snapped back to attention in less than a second, as he did, and was now staring at her. The Archbishop always looked her in the eyes, and no lower than that. It was a pleasant surprise, truly, even with all his comments about her being *disgusting* and such.

"It just came up." Subaru sighed, tapping his fingers against the edge of his chair, "Just now. Reinhard knows old Roswaal is working with us. We can't have any more information get out right now. I'm not ready yet."

"Are you worried the Margrave will spill his metaphorical guts?"

"I would like you to spill his literal guts, if possible."

Elsa couldn't help but smile: "I would like that just as much."

Subaru pulled a face. He always seemed so disgusted with her, and yet there was a certain strange type of respect in their interactions. She wasn't quite sure how he always seemed to know so much, but it mattered little to her. Honestly, if he still wasn't used to her, that was on him.

"Yeah, okay." he mumbled, "If you can, but first I'll need you to get rid of the other extras in the mansion. Two maids and a shut-in. Oh, and-"

He turned ice cold eyes on her: "It goes without saying, I assume, that if something happens to Emilia, there will be consequences."

She liked those eyes, specifically. That look. His eyes were ugly and lifeless, most of the time, but when he gave her that look, it was almost magnetically fascinating.

"Well, of course." she smiled.

"Good. I'm counting on you."

He snapped his fingers in her direction in a somewhat awkward gesture. A *finger gun* , he'd called it. It was painfully obvious that he was a foreigner sometimes.

Before Elsa could give an answer, he was looking around almost nervously: "Where's Meili? I have a job for her, too."

"I believe she's feeding her pets. She'll be back shortly."

"She'd better. She's not gonna want to miss this one."

Chapter 16: Chapter 16

Lady Emilia walked inside as fast as she could once he allowed her to. She always looked so nervous in public, and he couldn’t say he blamed her.

There was another layer to it, though, apparently: "Roswaal doesn't know I'm here." she whispered, "I think, at least. I asked one of the maids to cover for me, but I don’t know."

Reinhard frowned: "I wouldn’t want you to get in trouble, Lady Emilia."

She shook her head vigorously: "Oh, no! It's fine! I just… I wanted to tell you that Sir Felix was seen around here yesterday evening, and maybe-"

Before he could think to interrupt her, her eyes shifted to his right and she cut herself off with a stifled gasp. Behind him, as he soon found out, Felix stood at the entrance, holding himself up against a cabinet.

Shamefully, Reinhard forgot about the lady entirely the moment he saw him up and about.

"Felix!" he scolded, running to his friend’s side to help him, "You need to rest! You won't do yourself any favours by reopening a wound."

" *Wound* ?" cried Lady Emilia, "Are you hurt? I c- I can help!"

Felix waved her off and she was all too quick to silence herself. It was concerning, but not nearly as much as the way Felix fell into the chair Reinhard helped him to. He looked three times heavier than normal, and three times smaller at the same time.

Had he eaten lately?

“I’m just fine!” Felix exclaimed, almost chipper, with nothing behind his eyes, “Yes, I was wounded, but it’s just a cut now. I hardly think I need bed rest for that.”

Reinhard frowned: “You’re exhausted. Even a cut would be dangerous for you now.”

“My, my, Reinhard, I didn’t know you’d become a healer in my absence!” he commented, sarcastically, and his tail flicked with a certain satisfaction.

Still, he wasn’t intimidated: “I *have* been studying, actually. But I hardly need to know magic to know that you don’t usually stumble when you walk.”

Felix was just about to bite back with another snide remark, when they both felt watched and remembered they weren’t alone.

Reinhard bowed deeply: “Please, forgive us, Lady Emilia. We didn’t mean to alienate you from this conversation, it’s just…”

Felix’s tail fell: “...it’s just that Reinhard was a bit worried.” he completed, correctly, he might add.

Emilia shook her head: “Oh, no, it’s alright. May I ask you what happened? How did you get inj-”

She froze when she saw Felix look away: “Oh, oh, but if you don’t feel like telling me, that’s fine!” she squealed, waving her hands around anxiously, “No pressure at all!! I was just here to um… to check in on Sir Reinhard and tell him about some rumours I’d heard, but, if you’re here, then…”

“I was seen around here because I came here.” said Felix, “I was precisely on my way to this house. Something happened, but I’m fine *nyow* .”

She smiled almost tenderly, though that nervousness that engulfed her hadn't left: "That is… it's good to hear that. I was quite worried, myself, with everything that's been happening, but if you're alright, I suppose I should leave before Roswaal returns."

For some reason, *that* was what put Felix on high alert. He sprang to his feet, ignoring their protests, and repeated: " *Returns?* You mean he isn't at the mansion?"

Lady Emilia seemed rather intimidated.

"I-um. Yes. No. He left yesterday, but he hasn't told me exactly when he plans to return, so-"

"Lady Emilia."

She and Reinhard both flinched at the way Felix's tone had dropped. He looked right at them, for once, with his usual piercing eyes. He was giving off wave after wave of anxiety.

"Lady Emilia," he repeated, "Evacuate the mansion immediately."

Reinhard was not fond of the idea of leaving two children alone at home with everything that had been happening lately.

Reinhard also knew that it was still more likely to be safe than walking into the arms of an assassin; surely, he could protect himself and Lady Emilia from the Bowel Hunter, but the more people were around, the more collateral damage there would be.

That was why he left the mansion with Lady Emilia and Felix, who insisted on coming, in tow.

"You might need a healer." he said, but Reinhard could sense something else behind that statement. Something he wasn't ready to tell him yet.

Two people. He could protect two people. It was fine. As long as they stayed by his side, it was fine.

Annika was going to return any minute; in case she didn't, he took care to leave a note for her and Joshua, telling them to stay put. They didn't run into her on their way out, but it was fine.

Two people. Felix and Lady Emilia were powerful in their own right and they could take care of themselves. He knew that, of course, but he'd stopped relying on people's ability to defend themselves quite a long time ago.

Two people.

The count kept going up as they approached the mansion. Two maids. A spirit. That already made five people. When they knocked on the door, he was nervous to say the least.

The blue-haired twin was the one who opened the door.

She bowed her head: "Lady Emilia. I assume you…"

After a long pause, and a longer look at the two knights accompanying the lady, she finally finished the sentence: "...were successful."

"Rem, where is your sister?" asked Emilia, with a gentle smile that radiated pure anxiety. He sensed a different kind of anxiety coming from Rem at the question.

"Upstairs. Why?"

The curt answer made it all too clear that she was suspicious of their intentions.

Felix took the lead: "Listen, we need to evacuate this mansion. Everyone in here is in danger now."

Rem looked alarmed, to say the least, and Reinhard raised his hands in a placating gesture: "It's alright, we should have enough time to find your sister and the great spirit and leave. Please, Miss Rem, would you lead the way?"

She didn’t have time to answer.

From upstairs, a shout rang out.

" *El Fula!!* "

Reinhard didn't know what was happening. One moment, Rem stepped back, shoving Felix away.

The next moment, the ceiling collapsed.

Chapter 17: Chapter 17

Reinhard was almost sure something heavy had fallen on his head. He'd barely felt it.

His eyes swept over the scene.

The entrance hall was nearly covered by debris and a thick curtain of dust veiled his vision. Only a few feet away from him, he could make out Rem’s figure. She was moving, at least. His heart sank a bit when the dust began to settle and he realised she was trying to lift the heavy stone that had fallen on her right leg.

He went to help her, but not before looking behind him. He shivered. Exactly where Felix had been standing before Rem shoved him, the largest piece of debris had caved the floor in. He was laying where he'd fallen, too shocked to move. Beside him, Lady Emilia was wiping the dust away from her face.

Everyone was alive. He hadn’t completely failed yet.

Gently, he lifted the stone from Rem’s leg. She was screaming, but not in pain, though a bone had clearly been crushed to dust: "Sister! Sister!! *Ram!!* "

She attempted to stand up the moment the stone was lifted, only to stumble and fall into Reinhard’s arms: "My sister! Where is my sister?" she babbled, all semblance of grace and calm gone from her face.

"Please, stay with Felix and Lady Emilia." he told her, in the most reassuring tone he could manage, "Lady Emilia, can you protect yourselves while I search for Miss Ram?"

"My sister!"

"I will look for your sister." he promised, leaving the struggling girl in Felix's care.

The moment he stepped away, Lady Emilia raised a thick barrier of ice around them. It was, at least, more than enough to protect them from any more falling debris.

He set off running to find the pink-haired maid that must have been responsible for the spell and maybe the collapse. Surely, it was in self-defense. He had to hurry.

Upstairs, he found no trace of the assassin, except for a growing puddle of blood streaming out from under a door. A sick feeling grew in his stomach. He could only hope it was all from the assassin, but…

He entered the room.

No trace of the woman known as the Bowel Hunter. He would know her if he'd seen her.

The entire room was a disaster. It looked like a whirlwind of the highest level had swept its way through it. Part of the floor had crumbled, hence the ceiling collapse downstairs.

Beyond all that, though, he could make out the center of a second pool of blood.

If not for the uniform, he wouldn’t have recognised her as the other maid.

It was hard to tell people apart without their head.

Reinhard felt sick.

If he’d been left there, staring at the headless body of a girl that had been alive and well the last time he’d seen her, he was sure he would have lost his lunch for the first

time in his life.

But he didn’t have time to fully process what was in front of him before a horrible wave of sadistic, murderous pleasure washed over him from below. He recognised that feeling.

The last time he’d felt it, he’d walked among a sea of slaughtered guards.

He didn’t take the stairs. There was no time for that. The hole in the floor was big enough.

Crash!

For a moment, he thought he'd accidentally crashed through the dome of ice. No such luck. The sound did, indeed, come from the ice, but he wasn’t the one breaking it.

The assassin’s kukri, so foreign and yet so familiar, shattered the side of the ice bubble into a rain of shining crystal. Reinhard thought he heard a scream. No, not a scream, a spell.

" *El Huma!!* "

He wasn’t sure who had cast it, of the three water mages inside the ice shield, but he was more than happy to take the opportunity that Elsa's brief dodge allowed him as she jumped away to avoid seven spears of ice.

He went for her throat.

She ducked in time.

Cursing his lack of proper training under his breath, Reinhard struck again, and again, relentlessly. If he couldn’t kill her, he would just have to keep her away from the trio behind him. If his body was to become a shield, so be it.

Wasting no time, Felix ushered the two young women out of their bubble and Emilia took care to carry the still wounded maid. Rem had stopped crying and protesting, though her worried eyes still flitted back and forth in search of her twin.

It almost made Reinhard want to stretch the fight for as long as possible. But no, it would be delaying the inevitable and nothing more, wouldn't it?

A swish of the kukri, just a little closer than it should have been, reminded him to keep his eyes on the fearsome opponent in front of him. Locked in that deadly dance as they were, while it was true that Elsa couldn't find the time to escape or reach his friends, it was also true that Reinhard had no time to draw the Sword. In conclusion, they were at a rapid, dangerous stalemate.

The sword he was using was one he'd taken to carrying around with him lately. Normally, he loathed walking around armed, but that terrifying woman didn't warrant the mercy he would normally grant.

She had done enough harm.

Her patron, too, had done enough harm.

Once he was done with her, he was going to find the bastard.

Reinhard should have known his thoughts of vengeance would do more harm than good. He should have known not to let the faces of the dead swim through his mind. He should have known, but he didn’t.

A particularly bold strike on his part delayed him for just a moment, just enough for Elsa to jump away from him, graceful as a bird, deadly as a lioness. Out the corner of his eye, he saw the direction she was going.

The same direction as Felix and the others.

He was only a split second too late to stop her from taking a swipe at the injured Rem.

A spray of blood dyed the maid's blue hair red.

It came from Lady Emilia's chest.

Chapter 18: Chapter 18

For a moment, nothing happened.

For a moment, even Elsa's eyes widened in something akin to shock.

And then Reinhard made a run for her, and she jumped far out of his reach again.

"Oh, my." she sighed, "I'll be in trouble."

Having said that, taking full advantage of everyone's distraction, she vanished beyond the garden walls.

Emilia must have seen the attack coming. By virtue of that alone, she was a better hero than Reinhard would ever be.

For being able to put herself in the line of fire, even more so.

For actually, despite all of Reinhard’s power, being the one to finally drive Elsa away, she deserved all the praise he could possibly give her and more.

He gathered the lady in his arms, shaking with rage when she yelped in pain.

Rem, sitting on the ground beside her, stared at her in complete, paralysing shock.

"Why…" she murmured, "Why, why, why…?"

She recovered quickly enough.

"Lady Emilia!" she cried, holding her hands out, already surrounded by a halo of blue light. Felix didn’t stop her. He simply joined her in her efforts to close the wound.

After some time, he gently pulled at the torn fabric of Emilia's dress to check the status of the wound.

"This is as much energy as I can spare right now." he declared, "She will be fine as long as we get her some rest soon. Then I can try again."

"Lady Emilia!" Rem stuttered, "Why- did you-?"

She didn’t answer. She appeared to be unconscious, or close to it. But, if Felix said she would be fine, then…

"We should return, then." said Reinhard.

Rem did not like that idea: "My sister is still here!!" she exclaimed, trying her best to stand on her still shaking leg.

His stomach sank.

It was the second time in only a few months he'd had to give that kind of news. It didn’t make it any easier than looking Joshua in the eyes had.

In Rem’s face, he could almost see the boy and his despair.

The similarity only grew as their eyes met and she saw what he was going to tell her. Those sky blue eyes glistened with tears before he ever said anything.

"No." she sobbed.

"Miss Rem…"

"No!"

"I'm terribly sorry, but-"

She didn’t let him finish. Curling up on the ground, the maid wailed to the seven winds.

It was all he could do to hold her as Lady Emilia's blood slowly dried into their clothes.

After a fearsome resistance, Reinhard was forced to put Rem to sleep for everyone's safety and, above all, her own.

He hadn’t abandoned her sister, of course, the one she had been so desperate to find, but all he could do was drape the body and the head he recovered later into a cloth and carry them back with him.

The great spirit of the mansion was nowhere to be found, even after opening every door. He could only assume she, too, had fallen victim to the Bowel Hunter.

Reinhard’s hands shook with impotent rage as he cradled the maid's remains, apologising to her under his breath before respectfully securing her in the carriage's luggage compartment. He wanted to properly honour her, but he couldn’t ask everyone to ride with a decapitated corpse.

Not that it would have been any less of a gloomy ride, with their companions either covered in blood, unconscious, or both.

He glanced at the girls, lying in as secure a position as Felix could achieve so as to not strain their wounds.

Lady Emilia's white skin was even paler, he thought, though that might just have been a trick of the light, from the dark blood splattered across her upper body. The kukri had sliced all the way from her right side to her left, but thankfully, it had caught her lower ribcage, preventing her guts from spilling out as they undoubtedly would have had she been able to strike her real target.

And speaking of her target, Rem, lying next to her lady, looked almost peaceful in her sleep. It would have been a lovely sight, if only it weren't spoiled by the knowledge that her face would soon twist in agony as awareness brought memories back with it.

He hoped, somehow, that at least one of them would be able to help her. Lady Emilia, perhaps, who arguably knew her the best among them; Joshua, who shared her experience; Annika, who had been a steady presence in his grief.

Maybe even Felix.

But certainly not him.

"I need to ask you something."

For the first time since the beginning of the trip, Felix looked up at him with those strange, mutable eyes.

"Yes?" he answered, almost shyly.

"You knew they would attack this mansion when Roswaal was gone."

"Yes."

"Do you also know why they were only targeting the maids and the spirit?"

Felix took a deep sigh: "Yes." he admitted, "But, to be honest, I think we should have that conversation once Lady Emilia has recovered a little. It involves her more than it does you or me."

Reinhard masked the shameful sting of disappointment in his chest with a smile: "I understand."

Felix didn't buy it: "I know you want answers. I can still give them. Just not this one, not yet, not until the leading lady of this plot can hear."

It was a clear invitation.

Ask me something else.

Let's talk.

Reinhard accepted the invitation.

"I do have one question."

"Yes?"

"Why the red?"

Felix's tail shivered in discomfort, but a deal was a deal. Before Reinhard could say anything, he replied:

"I just don't like Blue that much anymore."

To say that Reinhard was feeling anxious would be an understatement. By the time they were near home, he could have sworn that Lady Emilia's face had turned even paler than before, and it took Felix giving her another short treatment session to stop him from ditching the carriage and carrying her to a proper bed himself.

"Don't jostle her more than we need to."

Doctor's orders. Not much he could do. Reinhard was shamefully unaware of certain things that normal human bodies struggled with. He had no choice but to rely on Felix in that regard.

But then, he'd sort of missed relying on him.

Ultimately, he wasn't as willing to let him out of his sight as dedicating his full attention to Lady Emilia would have required. It was selfish, yes, but maybe that was the reason he'd brought him along in the first place. Maybe selfishness wasn't always as bad as he'd been taught.

He chased those thoughts away. No, that wasn't the way to think.

But he'd be lying if he said he wasn't relieved when Felix sensed his unease and put a hand on his shoulder to comfort him.

Comfort was not selfish. Was it?

Was it?

As they finally approached his estate, Felix's ears twitched. When he processed what he was hearing, the colour drained from his face.

"Reinhard…" he murmured, "...do you hear that?"

He listened.

Reinhard, the Saint, was a sinner.

Failure was not a sin, but failure of such caliber deserved nothing but punishment.

That was all he could think about as distant howls rang out from the house.

Chapter 19: Intermission #4

Joshua had fully expected a long conversation in the morning. He had spent, perhaps, a little too long worrying about it, obsessing over every point he or the others could potentially bring up.

All this to say, what he felt upon finally gathering the courage to go downstairs, only to find the house nearly empty, was an unholy combination of disappointment and relief.

"What's with that look?" Annika asked him, setting what was probably meant to be his breakfast down on the table.

Her face suggested that she knew what *that look* was.

"Where is everyone?"

Wordlessly, Annika passed him a note.

One word struck him right away.

“An *emergency* ?” he gasped, looking back at the maid as if seeking confirmation.

She frowned: “I don’t know any more than you do. When I came back, they were gone. Now eat your breakfast.” she all but ordered, not-so-subtly pushing a pastry closer to him.

“What about you?”

“I already ate. I’ve been awake for four hours.”

“Ah.”

So had he, actually. Only, he’d spent that time stressing over a potential conversation instead of being a productive member of the household. He felt his cheeks flush a little at the thought.

He really needed to do better.

“I will clean up.” he promised.

Annika looked ready to answer him.

Then, her eyes shifted to look over his shoulder and all colour drained from her face.

“Hey, Joshua?” she murmured, almost entranced, “Did you know that the armoury in this house doubles as a panic room?”

He felt something coil in his gut.

“What’s behind me?” he forced himself to whisper so he wouldn’t scream, “Annika, what’s behind me?”

“Just run.”

“Annika?”

For the first time, she seemed to snap out of it. She looked at him: “There’s a mabeast at the window.” she said, “And I think it’s going to-”

Crash!

Joshua was not born to run. His breath ran short almost the second he and Annika started sprinting for the armoury, but having her pull him along by the wrist helped enough that he was able to avoid collapsing in the hallway.

Every window, one by one, was attacked; the hallway became a bestiary, with framed creatures only a single layer of glass away from jumping at their throats.

Illness or not, Joshua felt like he was going to faint the moment he stopped running.

Another crash behind him, a sharp pain in his calf, probably a loose shard of glass flying by him. It was all muffled. His ears began to ring.

Before he knew it, a door was slammed shut behind him. Vaguely, through a dark haze, he could see Annika closing its five locks in an almost practiced fashion. One after the other.

His own breath hissed in his ear. He could see the locks clicking into place, but he couldn't hear them anymore.

He tried to sit down.

It failed. It was more like falling, falling a long distance towards a deep black lake.

Was he going to drown?

A hand on his wrist made him jump. Who?

He opened his eyes to Annika, saying something he couldn't hear.

A dark curtain began to fall over his eyes. Before he blacked out entirely, the last thing he thought he'd seen was a little red spot at the level of his ankle. No, two.

Oh, who could say?

He lost consciousness.

Chapter 20: Chapter 20

Reinhard could run faster than most.

But it was never fast enough, was it? No matter how he struggled, no matter how fast he ran, no matter how little it would have taken for him to make people cower, he was never enough.

That was all he could think about as he sliced his way through a horde of dogs, snakes, spiders, and every horrible creature the Witch had created. It was like cutting through paper, physically, and still all he could think about was: *I failed, I failed, I failed again.*

Out the corner of his eye, he spotted a different figure. Unfamiliar, small, the least threatening by far among the creatures swarming the house, and yet he knew the moment he saw her; he could tell, she was the one responsible.

His heart ached and rejoiced all at once as he abruptly changed course to run to her. The fear in the child's eyes made him want to console her as he always did. Everything behind those same eyes, though, made him want to bring her to justice.

She put her hands forward: "Stop!!" she cried, "You can't! I'm the only one who can call them off!"

"Then call them off." he growled. The sword, dripping with the witch beasts' dark blood, was pointed in her direction, and her eyes fixed on it. She was frightened.

Before the girl could answer, though, he heard something that froze the blood in his veins.

An unfamiliar scream, distant, muffled by the walls of the house.

The scream of a girl.

Had he ever heard Annika scream before?

His hand clenched around the hilt of the other sword: "Call them off." he repeated, "And never come here again. Under those conditions alone, I will not punish you."

Any trace of fear vanished from her face. She took her sweet time thinking, as Reinhard’s ear strained more and more, almost hoping to hear another scream.

"Quickly." he added, between his teeth.

She tapped her chin.

In an instant, the hellish cries of the mabeasts came to an end. Their heads snapped towards the little girl and, faster than he could blink, the dog that was furiously throwing itself at the windows trotted over to her like a docile puppy.

"Fine." she shrugged, "It was all just a prank, anyway."

"A *prank* ?"

"I'd go check inside if I were you, mister!"

She walked away, followed, as promised, by the army of mabeasts. As he turned to follow her advice, she added, under her breath: "A message."

He was already running. There were more important things to think about.

He knew before he was anywhere near it that they had taken refuge in the armoury. He'd told Annika to go there should something happen. She had listened, clearly, if the trail of destruction in the hallway was any indication.

The most worrying thing, though, was that the thick door of the armoury was cracked. No, not cracked, broken; with a hole in its center and the headless body of a witch dog slumped in front of it. On the ground, slowly mixing with its viscous blood, he could make out a stain of lighter, thinner *human* blood coming from under the broken door.

To say he burst into the armoury would be an understatement. The door, already broken, was nearly pulverised by his entrance.

The sharp *crack* of splintering wood was met with a startled yelp from inside.

Annika, as he soon found out, was the origin of both the blood and the scream. She wasn't cowering, exactly. Clutching a halberd with a dented handle, she stood guard over the door of a closet, which she'd clearly emptied of all the knives that used to be inside it. The bottom of her right sleeve had been torn off and wrapped around her left forearm, soaked with blood.

His eyes met hers, wide with fear and yet drooping with exhaustion. The moment she processed the sight, the halberd fell from her hands.

Reinhard wasn’t entirely sure what he was doing when he opened his arms. He only knew after she'd tackled him in a hug.

"I'm sorry." he murmured, setting a hand on the back of her head, "You must have been frightened. Are you injured?"

She nodded against his chest: "A little, but it's better now."

"May I see?"

She pulled away, though her eyes clearly avoided her bandaged arm: "Not right now."

Her gaze shifted to the closet behind her.

Of course, that could only mean one thing.

He gulped: "Is…"

"Yes." she answered, reaching for the key hanging from a spare bow string, "Yes, he is."

Inside, curled up with his forehead resting on his knees, Joshua appeared to be sleeping.

It wasn’t a restful sleep, by any stretch. He was panting heavily, and beads of sweat ran down his neck. There was something like a tourniquet around his leg.

Reinhard wasted no time gathering the boy in his arms. He was a little too warm. Feverish, almost. The knight couldn't help but tighten his grip just a little when bleary yellow eyes stared back at him without a hint of recognition. The family resemblance was always clear, but in that case…

"Careful." chided Annika, under her breath.

Right.

Squeezing him was probably not a good idea.

"Joshua?" he murmured.

Joshua blinked. He seemed to recognise his own name, at least, because his attention was now on Reinhard.

"Yes?"

He heard Annika gasp quietly behind him. He ignored her, for the time being: "Joshua, are you alright?"

"I dunno." mumbled Joshua. His feeble attempt to shrug only resulted in his shoulder slightly nudging Reinhard's chest. "Oh! Oh, I'm sorry!" he whined when he noticed, "I hit you, I'm sorry!"

"No, no, it's okay." he assured him, pulling him just a little closer in something like a hug, "You didn't hurt me. What happened?"

"I don't know."

Joshua was slurring his words. His eyes were clearly glazed over, and he didn't seem to be fully aware of what was happening. If he hadn't known any better, he would've said he'd been drugged. Having found no answer, he turned the question back to Annika instead: "What happened? From the beginning."

"We were just in the dining room." she said, "And then, I saw a witch dog at the window. It broke in. We fled to the armoury, but…" she sighed, glancing at Joshua, "...he collapsed as soon as we got there. I thought it was just his illness at first, but…"

She walked up to them. Her uninjured arm reached out to Joshua's leg and she pulled the edge of his trousers up to expose the deathly pale skin of his ankle.

Against it, a smudged trace of dried blood stood out. It came from the unmistakable mark of a venomous snake's bite. It wasn't bleeding anymore, but-

"The venom!" Reinhard gasped.

Annika put her hand up: "No, I… I got most of that out, I think. But I had to make him bleed a little for that." she grimaced.

He inspected the bite. So she had managed to move the blood and stop the spread of the venom. It was no small feat for an inexperienced healer, but it had clearly left her exhausted, as her shaking knees testified.

Reinhard reached out to support her good arm.

"You did good." he murmured, "You did so good. What happened to your arm, though? Were you… were you bitten?"

"No." her face flushed, "I panicked and ran into a sword. Like an idiot." she muttered.

He couldn't help but chuckle at that. It might have been because he wanted to cry, and hug her once again, and keep her away from every sword in existence. It might have been because relief was the most powerful recipe for laughter.

Either way, Annika made a noise in the back of her throat that told him she never wanted to hear of the incident again, and he changed the subject.

"Alright. Let's get him to Felix." he smiled, but his face fell the moment he remembered who exactly he'd left Felix with. "Quickly." he added, "Something happened at the Mathers mansion. He's close by."

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

"Okay." she nodded. Her legs stilled just a little.

He wasn't having it.

“Here.” he said, turning his back to her and bending his knees just enough to allow her to reach his neck. Joshua, still secure in his arms, appeared to be either unconscious or too dizzy to speak.

Annika caught on after just a moment of confusion.

Her arms locked around his neck. He could feel her head resting against his shoulder blade in something a little too similar to a hug.

He shook his head slightly.

“Hold on tight.” he murmured.

And then he ran.

Chapter 21: Chapter 21

Felix hadn’t left the carriage, he found.

He was leaning out of the window as discreetly as he could, but he hadn’t dared to leave. Reinhard couldn’t blame him. It occurred to him only as Felix was in his line of sight again that perhaps he shouldn't have left him alone with the injured. A pang of guilt started something like a fire in his insides; the familiar fire of guilt.

Felix put it out the second he attempted to apologise, though.

"No." he raised his hand to stop Reinhard, "Actually, I wasn't too worried. I'm safe for now. He isn't going to attack me if he wants Lady Emilia to have any chance at a full recovery. And they've learned from last time not to attack while she's around." he added, glancing back with worry clear in his eyes. His gaze shifted down to Reinhard’s arms, and to Joshua, nestled between them.

"Are they both well?"

Reinhard glanced over his shoulder, but Annika gave no sign of letting go of his shoulders.

“Not as well as I would have liked.” he murmured. Gently, he knelt to lay Joshua on the smoothest ground he could find, “Give him a look. He’s been bitten by a snake mabeast.”

Felix, though hesitant, nodded and pressed two fingers to Joshua’s neck and a hand to his chest. Presumably to check his heartbeat and breath, maybe his temperature. Reinhard wasn’t too knowledgeable in his field; watching him was fascinating, and at the same time made him aware of just how ignorant he was. Silently, he stepped back a little to give the healer some space.

“Annika.” he whispered, “Is something wrong?”

“No.” she mumbled against his back, but she took just a second too long to answer, and more time still to finally let go and put her feet back on the ground. The moment she had, she essentially collapsed against the side of the carriage and sat still next to its front wheel.

Reinhard glanced back at Felix. When he found a neutral, focused but not concerned expression on his face, he determined that it was probably alright to let him do his thing and returned his attention to her.

“Are you alright? Do you feel ill?” he asked her, as softly as he could.

She shook her head but, before she could give a better answer, Felix spoke up behind him: “She’s strained her gate a little. Let her rest, get her to sleep if you can, and she’ll be fine. And get Puck over here, I know he’s awake.”

He heaved a sigh of relief: “Good. You heard him. There’s more space inside the carriage, and I have to go and check in on them anyway. Would you like to rest in there?”

Her only answer was stretching her arms up.

She probably just wanted him to help her up, but she voiced no complaints when he scooped her up and opened the carriage door as quietly as he could.

Before it was open all the way, a little grey cat slinked out through the crack in the window and bounced on Felix’s shoulder.

That was another concern taken care of. Now for the last.

Rem was awake.

Unexpectedly, he might add. Even more unexpectedly, she was acting nothing like the screaming mess they had carried away from the Mathers mansion. She sat, completely still, across from Lady Emilia, her eyes fixed on her sleeping face as if she wanted to find something. She didn't find it. Instead, without hurry, long after the door was open, her sky blue eyes shifted to meet Reinhard's.

She didn't say anything, but Divine Empathy told him all he needed to know.

Numbness.

"Miss Rem," he greeted, bowing his head, "I see you're awake."

She just nodded. Nodded and then went back to studying her master's face.

He felt himself grow a little desperate for a real response: "Ah, how is Lady Emilia faring?"

Rem finally spoke up: "She will live, no thanks to you or me."

It stung, but she wasn't wrong to blame him. He bowed a little further, careful to keep Annika balanced: "To say that I am mortified would be too little. I have no words to apologise to you, or Lady Emilia. I can only say that I'm sorry, but I know that wouldn't be enough for anyone, so if there's anything I can do, I…"

He cut himself off when Annika shifted, but he looked down to find her seemingly asleep. He laid her down next to Lady Emilia and hoped that neither of them moved in their sleep.

Rem caught the pitying look in his eyes then: "You speak like a knight, but you look at us all like a worried brother. Stop it. If you're going to look at me like that, then speak sincerely."

He almost flinched. Of course, he was well aware that the twin maids had a reputation for being direct, but to be on the receiving end of it was… new, to say the least.

"O-oh…" he cleared his throat, "Forgive me, Miss Rem-"

"First of all, it's just Rem."

"Rem." he corrected himself, ignoring the uncomfortable weight in his lungs, "I'm sorry. I didn't realise it was bothering you."

"It was bothering me terribly."

"And I'm sorry for that, but I'm not… I'm not entirely sure how you want me to speak to you, then. This is just how I normally speak." he smiled.

It was Rem's turn to give him something like a pitying look: "You can't possibly speak to strangers and friends in the same way. If you do, I feel sorry for you."

He knew from the sting in his gut that she had struck something tender. He brushed his hair away from his forehead, stopped dead in his tracks when he realised where he'd picked up that habit, cleared his throat again, and finally composed himself enough to answer her: "I was raised to be polite to everyone. I don't think there's anything wrong with that."

Rem tilted her head. He could feel she wasn't convinced, and yet…

"No," she agreed, "There isn't."

Chapter 22: Intermission #5

"You *what?* '

She didn’t like it. She didn’t like it when he went cold like that. She didn’t hate the look in his eyes, but his tone made her want to cut his tongue out. That was pretty normal, in all honesty.

At some point, Elsa had wanted to cut everybody open. That went for him too.

But still, having him so angry at her was slightly upsetting. They were working together, after all, and it was a shame to disappoint him so much and compromise their amiable working relationship.

It was bothering her.

Even more so, how her hand twitched around her blade. For some reason, his irritation was actually getting under her skin, just enough for her thoughts to turn a little darker than usual. She shrugged her shoulders, trying to brush off the thoughts in question. But he was making it very hard.

“You incompetent… gh- nevermind.” he groaned, “Nevermind! Take two, everyone!! Places!!”

He was laughing. Why was he laughing?

Why did he laugh as he picked up the blade from the table?

Why did he laugh as he traced the hem of his coat with it?

Why did he laugh as the knife drew the first drop of blood from that small bare triangle on his chest?

And, most importantly, why didn’t she want to stop him?

She was thankfully saved from that inconvenient question when he stopped all by himself, looking pensively down at the little droplet on his sternum.

“Or… not.” he murmured, “Maybe I can still fix this. Maybe, even though you fucked up colossally, maybe I can make this even better. Hmm…”

The knife clattered as he casually tossed it back on the table.

He turned to Elsa, pointing straight at her forehead: “One more chance for both of us. Since Meili, unlike you, did such a good job, it would be a shame to waste her work on *your* failure. It goes without saying, I assume, that Blue can’t be touched until Emilia’s fully recovered. Or so I *would* assume, anyway, except you seem to have some trouble with instructions.”

The irritation boiled in her guts until she wanted to rip them out. It wasn’t like she would die from it. But that was nothing new; her bowels had grown tiring to her, with all the times she’d seen them.

Now, *his* , on the other hand…

She pushed the frustration down. It was useless to argue that it had been a simple mistake on her part or, even worse, to remind him that it was Emilia herself who had stepped in front of the blade. Because, of course, Emilia could never be blamed or shamed or insulted, not if she wanted to continue that working relationship they had.

She began to dislike that Emilia girl.

It was kind of a shame she hadn't cut all the way to her guts. She was curious as to whether or not they would be cold, too. If so, that would make her extraordinary, and yet more unlikeable still.

But none of that could come out in front of Subaru.

So, she shoved all those thoughts back and just nodded: "I will avoid even going near them."

"Good!" barked Subaru, "Maybe then you'll be able to avoid *accidentally* murdering the people we actually need. Jesus…"

He mumbled that strange expletive, throwing his hands out in frustration. She'd heard him say it before, but she had no clue as to what it meant.

It didn't matter.

He turned to leave but, before he could, he froze dead in his tracks like he did sometimes and turned back to her.

"Elsa." he mumbled, all the irritation gone from his voice.

She tilted her head: "Yes?"

"I need a favour from you."

"Mh? What kind of favour?"

He usually meant *killing someone.* Good thing her blade was nice and sharp.

Instead, when he looked up at her, he had those empty eyes she hated. She would be lying if she said she'd never thought about gouging them out.

"If I tell you to, kill me." he said, "You, rather than Reinhard. If it comes down to it, and he's about to kill me, just cut my head off. Then you can play with my guts or whatever the fuck you want, I don't care. So?"

Well, it *was* about killing someone, then. Just not anyone she expected.

Pushing past the shock, she nodded.

With no bite left in him, Subaru sighed and left.

"Thanks." he sighed on his way out.

Chapter 23: Chapter 23

When Felix asked to talk to him, his first instinct was to panic.

“Is there something wrong?” he asked the Great Spirit that Felix had apparently convinced to be his messenger.

The grey cat’s tail flicked outward, as if inviting him to leave the carriage: “Well, sure. But I wouldn’t know what it is. He just panicked all of a sudden and told me to come get you so you can talk in private.”

He didn’t wait a moment longer to stand up and leave.

His friend’s face was dark, darker than when he’d dropped Joshua into his arms, and that couldn’t be good. At the same time, he realised after a moment of fear, he’d been out there so long that, if something had been wrong with Joshua, he or the Great Spirit would surely have given the alarm.

But the fear was still there, wasn’t it? Palpable and painful, it stung him from all sides; from within, from Felix, from the girls in the carriage, perhaps from whatever fever dream Joshua was having, he felt it press against the barrier around his soul.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, in a hurry, closing the carriage door as quietly as he could to give Rem some space and the others some rest.

Felix didn’t hesitate a single second to answer: “Reinhard, do you know what this is?” he asked, lifting the unconscious Joshua’s leg just enough to show off the two marks above his ankle.

Roundabout questions. Never a good sign.

“It’s a snake bite.” he answered, to the best of his abilities.

“A *mabeast* snake bite.” Felix corrected, “I’ve had Puck look him over, and guess what he found?”

He really wished Felix would just say it like it was. Regardless of that tiny, shameful sting of irritation in his chest, he replied with a neutral: “What did he find?”

“Nothing.”

He thought he’d misheard him for a second. *Nothing.* What was the problem, then?

He blinked a few times: “Pardon?”

He must have misheard. Right?

“He found *nothing* .” Felix repeated, “No curses.”

“But that’s good, isn’t it?” smiled Reinhard, with the painful tug at his cheek of someone who wanted to frown.

“ *Good* is extremely relative.” his friend sighed, “But no curses on a mabeast bite, half an hour after the bite itself, after being swarmed by so many of them? That is not a coincidence. These things don’t just *happen* , Reinhard, you have to make them happen. That, and the fact that an entire army of mabeasts couldn’t get past a few locks and a fifteen-year-old maid who’s never lifted a weapon in her life? This isn’t a miracle, it’s a damn *game* !” he cried out, standing up to face Reinhard. Had he grown taller? Or was Reinhard slouching?

He didn’t know anymore. As the implications of what Felix was telling him began to sink in, he shook his head with a tiny, nervous laugh: “No, no, Felix, you’re mistaken. I- I got

there just in time, I instructed Annika on what to do in an emergency months ago, she held them off long enough to-"

" *He's toying with you!* " Felix shouted, enraged, and his arms burst outward from where they'd been clenched at his sides, "You are playing chess deaf and blind! You either take the blindfold off and the earplugs out, or you lose. At this rate, we'll be eaten, you'll be trapped and you know it. He's- he's toying with you." he repeated, backing off a step, "Playing with his food. I know he is. I know he means you harm. I know that. I knew that."

His voice dropped to a mumble. He ran his fingers through his unkempt hair over and over again, scratching at his scalp, pulling his head as far down as his neck would allow so Reinhard couldn't see his face.

His shoulders began to shake. All of him was shaking. It was… wobbling, like a wave, only for a moment, and then Reinhard hurriedly wiped at his eye and he was still again.

Ashamed of that single moment of weakness, he rushed to comfort his friend, but pulled his hand away when Felix flinched at the briefest touch to his hair.

"No." he mumbled. Even in a single syllable, he could read the real answer behind it.

Don't touch my hair right now.

"I'm sorry." Reinhard bowed his head, briefly, "I will not touch you."

"Mh. No."

Felix sighed, running a hand over his face, and reached out himself, holding Reinhard by what was probably meant to be his shoulders but, with their height difference and with his head still lowered, ended up being his arms.

"Don't lose." he murmured, "Don't. I can't… I'm going to be honest, I don't know if… if I could take that. I've just barely stepped back from the edge, and I've seen how easy it is to fall off. Right now, for now, for the time being, you… you and your stupidly strong arms are the only thing between me and that abyss. So don't let me fall. Please."

It was said so quietly that even Reinhard struggled to hear it over the rush of the breeze in the trees, but he understood every word regardless. He didn't need ears to understand it.

He lowered his head to brush his cheek against his friend's shoulder when Felix pulled him into a hug. Closed his arms around him as much as he could, like a safety blanket.

A cocoon, maybe, from which Felix could emerge with new wings, to replace the ones his so-called *master* had ripped away like a sadistic toddler playing with a butterfly.

"I'm not going to lose." he answered, just as quietly, but close enough to Felix's ear that he had no doubt he had heard him, "I promise that I will do everything in my power and more to ensure I don't lose. You, and all of these people…" he nodded vaguely in the direction of the carriage and of Joshua at their feet, "...are going to live through this."

"And you, too." Felix added, with a half-hearted slap on the back of his head, "Don't forget you."

"You don't have to worry about me dying, Felix. You know that."

"I don't want you to get anywhere close to it, that's the point."

He couldn't help but laugh quietly, and shake his head when Felix's hair flew up to tickle his nose: "I will not die. I promised I wouldn't let you fall, didn't I? Promises are important to me, too."

For the first time since the beginning of that hug that neither of them were keen on leaving, Felix glared up, straight into his eyes.

“They’d better be.”

Reinhard knew, and he knew very well, that the battle had to end soon. One way or another, he had to extinguish the flames of the Archbishop’s obsession from their origin.

He just didn’t expect those flames to become physical.

To become, unequivocally, real.

Chapter 24: Chapter 24

Reinhard knew, in some capacity, that he was the only one who had spoken to every member of their group.

He did not, however, become fully aware of it until later, when Joshua woke up.

"What?" was the very first thing he said.

It was understandable, really, given that he'd woken up in a completely still carriage (whose driver had been dismissed), surrounded by five people and a spirit, only half of which he was acquainted with.

Reinhard was at his side in an instant, though given the size of the carriage, that wasn't an accomplishment: "Joshua! How do you feel?"

He watched the boy's face go from confused, to annoyed, and right back to confused.

"Why is *he* here?" he whispered, and it came out like a hiss.

He , being Felix, clearly heard him, but did not protest.

That was Reinhard's job.

"I know you don't want to be near him, and I'm sorry." he started, putting his hands in front of him in a placating gesture, "But, for the time being, this group must remain close to me. That includes both of you. You would be in danger otherwise."

He could sense the anger coming off of Joshua in waves, but it dissipated like morning mist in less than a second when his last memories came back.

"Annika!" he exclaimed, attempting to sit up only to be immediately blocked by Reinhard, "Is she alright? I-"

Emilia, on the other side of the carriage, shushed him. She hadn't been awake long. Her violet eyes turned to her right shoulder, where Annika had unconsciously laid her head. Sometime during her rest, she had shifted to curl up close to Emilia. And Emilia, on her part, looked both embarrassed and happy that she had clung to her.

"I think it's been a while since she's had her mother to hold her like this." she murmured, "But then, I guess mothers just stay with you like that."

Reinhard chose not to listen to her.

"She's just tired." he smiled, "You were the one we were worried about."

Joshua's cheeks flushed a little, though not nearly as much as usual, given that he was still recovering from the venom and the blood loss. He cleared his throat: "I'm very sorry. Mortified, even. I didn't mean to worry anyone."

"You're forgiven. This time." Rem stated, flatly.

"Who are you, miss?" he asked her in return.

"I'm Rem."

"I don't think that answered his question." Puck giggled, from where he was resting on Emilia's other shoulder.

"Too bad for him. I'm just Rem. Emilia said so."

She spoke as decisively as always, but her eyes turned to the lady in question as if seeking confirmation for what she had just said.

“Yes.” Emilia nodded, “I’m not your master anymore. I’m sorry you have to stick with me still, but…”

“I don’t *have* to do anything.” she corrected, “I have chosen to stay with you for the time being. If Rem wanted to leave, not even the Sword Saint or Emilia could stop her.”

Rem had been surprisingly quick to drop the honorifics when her former master had asked her to. Still, there was an awkwardness in her attempts to talk to Emilia like a normal person.

It was endearing.

The ex-maid shook her head and turned back to Joshua: “And who are *you* , strange child?”

Reinhard stiffened. He could feel his usual pacifying voice slip out before he was even speaking.

“Miss- uh, Rem, I mean, Rem…” he corrected himself, “This is Joshua. He’s been staying with me ever since…”

His voice faltered and died. Joshua was stronger than him.

“Ever since the death of my older brother.” he completed the sentence without so much as a tremble in his voice. Almost detached.

Rem didn’t flinch, but Reinhard could almost feel her heart skip a beat.

And they all knew why.

Nobody spoke for a while after that awkwardness, though Rem’s eyes flitted back and forth between Joshua and Emilia, still laying in their respective makeshift cots.

Emilia's wound had almost completely healed. She had complained of some lingering rib pain when Felix had asked, but aside from that, she could've sat up easily, if not for Annika laying on her shoulder. With that, she showed absolutely no interest in moving and instead simply matched the girl's movements anytime she snuggled up closer or trembled in her sleep. Her eyes were full of awkward compassion. Reinhard found those transparent eyes endearing.

Eventually, though, Annika had to wake up. And wake up she did, blinking slowly at the unfamiliar white dress beneath her forehead. She groaned, sleepy and confused, turning her head just enough to meet Lady Emilia’s violet eyes. And then she froze.

“Oh- hello!” smiled Lady Emilia, “I hope you feel better now.”

Annika’s face flushed. She made a noise that landed somewhere between embarrassed and confused and tried to push herself off of the lady’s shoulder, accidentally shoving herself past the edge of their cot.

She landed safely in Reinhard’s arms, but the panic on her face was still evident.

“Sir- Reinhard!” she stuttered, and her shoulders seemed to melt in relief.

He gave her the most reassuring smile he could manage: “You’re awake. I’m sorry you were confused, I put you next to Lady Emilia earlier and you seem to… um…”

“You curled up on my shoulder.” she chimed in, finally sitting up and swinging her legs off the cot, “I’m sorry if I frightened you. I assure you, if I’d known it was a problem, I would’ve moved awa-”

“Oh- no, no!” Annika shook her head frantically, “That’s not it, I was uh- I was confused, that’s all. The last thing I remember is Sir Reinhard picking me up and…”

She trailed off. Her eyes flitted anxiously about the inside of the carriage until they met Joshua’s.

“Oh.” she murmured, but it came out more like a sigh of relief, “You made it. Are you okay?”

“I feel like I should be asking you that.” he frowned, “You were asleep for quite a bit longer than me.”

“Yes, but I was *asleep* .” she pointed out, “You were *unconscious* . There’s a difference.”

His expression softened a bit: “I’m fine. You got the venom out. It was all fine from there.”

“That was impressive.” someone chimed in.

It was Felix, curled up near the window, as far away from the group as he could get. And he immediately seemed to regret catching their attention.

He didn’t let himself be *too* discouraged by their looks, though, and added: “It’s not easy for someone with so little experience to get snake venom out. But now you should refrain from using magic for a few weeks at least.”

“I don’t recall anyone asking you.” Joshua murmured, but he had enough restraint to say it quietly, at least. Felix heard him anyway, but as always, he let everything Joshua said slide, no matter how venomous.

Reinhard was quick to mediate: "I asked him earlier, actually. It's only fair Annika should know."

Joshua, as expected, didn’t bite back. He had the guts to take a jab, but not to follow it up.

Annika, on her part, went along with it and changed the subject: "What happened?"

She was met with silence.

“Got it.” she said, quietly, after little more than a brief glance at the others.

Apparently, the silence compelled her to change the subject: “So, then… what are we going to do?”

Her question prompted uneasy looks from everyone, but only Rem composed herself quickly enough to give her a decent answer.

“We haven’t shared ideas yet, so I’ll go first.” she said, “It is my understanding that Sir Felix spent time with the mastermind. So we should go find him. Surely, he’s no match for all of us.”

Reinhard could’ve sworn he’d seen a flicker of pink light shining through her hair, but it was gone the second he looked her in the eyes. Before even realising, he’d put his arm out in front of Felix, separating him from Rem despite neither of them showing any intention to move.

“We can’t do that.” he explained, with an apologetic smile, “Felix doesn’t know where he is. He doesn’t have a steady base.”

“And he never returns to the one he left.” Felix sighed, “Finding him would be like finding a needle in a haystack. I’d rather start with the other two; they’re a lot easier to

trace. Everyone knows the Bowel Hunter, and Meili is almost constantly surrounded by rare mabeasts, so-”

“I’d rather not.” Rem interrupted him, “We might be ill-equipped to handle those two, but their master is human, isn’t he? Without orders, what are the others gonna do?”

“They could do anything.” murmured Annika, “We don’t know what their plans are, exactly. Do we?”

Felix finally regained some air of confidence in his posture.

“We have a basic understanding.” he said, “Just so everyone is on the same page here, I will state clearly what his goals are. Apologies in advance to Reinhard and Lady Emilia.”

“Hey, now.”

“No, Puck, let him speak.”

After Emilia’s only input in that conversation, Felix finally seemed to feel safe enough to speak up: “He has two stated, non-negotiable goals.” he declared, putting up his index and middle finger, “One: ensure that Lady Emilia gains the throne of Lugnica. And two:” his voice dropped a little: “...make Reinhard’s life a living hell. You may note, we have exactly the people he’s focused on.”

He looked back at Reinhard, but he couldn’t make the observation Felix wanted him to make. His throat seemed to have closed up. Conveniently enough, he was saved by Joshua coming to the exact same conclusion.

“So we may have the necessary tools to lure him out.” he murmured.

Felix visibly tried to push down his desperate enthusiasm: “Yes, exactly! Trying to find him is a waste of time, but maybe… maybe, after Elsa messed up, he’ll be much less willing to send her to us.”

“That still leaves the other one.” Rem pointed out, “I haven’t seen her, but you said she’s a mabeast user. She’s just as dangerous.”

“Not quite.”

“How so?” Annika tilted her head a little.

“She and Elsa have both been somewhat defanged, you might say.” he explained, “Meili’s attacks aren’t exactly precise. Even if he trusts her, he doesn’t trust her anywhere near Lady Emilia. Essentially, what I’m saying is…”

Lady Emilia shrank in her seat, crushed on all sides by their attention.

“...we have the human equivalent of a barrier with us.”

She couldn’t handle their looks, but they only realised it when Puck slinked out from under her hair and *shoo* ed them with his little paws: “Hey, stop that! My daughter isn’t a barrier. And she’s shy!”

Everyone but Rem turned their eyes away immediately.

“Great Spirit, sir?” she called.

Puck flicked his tail and tilted his head as if to say: *I’m listening.*

Rem pointed at the sliver of golden light shining through the window: “It’s past 5pm now. If we really are safe for the time being, we should rest and carry out any plans we come up with tomorrow. We’re going to lose a lot of fighting power if we go out now.”

“Aaaah, you’re right, Rem.” he sighed, stretching in perfect cat fashion over Emilia’s head, “Get some rest, all of you, or I’ll have to scold you tomorrow. Good night, Lia.”

“Good night, Puck.” she smiled, giving him one last scratch behind the ears before he vanished into her pendant.

She looked back at the rest of the group, and then swept her eyes over the inside of the carriage.

“Oh, but if we just stay here…” she murmured, “It’s going to be tight, and cold, and I’m worried some of us might not be able to sleep.”

“Only the first floor of the house was attacked by those mabeasts.” said Reinhard, “We can go back there, if you would feel more at ease. Unfortunately, we would still have to all be near each other in order to be effectively safe.”

“I understand.” Emilia nodded, “We shouldn’t separate, of course, but…”

“I can put more mattresses and extra beds in the room.” he assured her, “If that’s what you were worried about.”

It was, apparently.

He tried to ignore the state of the house when they returned, but he couldn’t ignore the anxiety he felt even in the ten seconds it took him to carry another bed into the master bedroom. Felix noticed, unfortunately.

“You know, you don’t need to run.” he whispered, “We’re safe right now.”

“I know that.” he smiled.

Liar.

Reinhard laid down near the door. Emilia, near the window.

She looked something between shocked and overjoyed when Rem claimed the other side of the double bed. Annika, red as a beet, quietly asked to be included, and Rem let her lie down in the middle.

Felix pushed a single mattress in the corner. Corners were safe, he’d told him once. They made him feel better. But the fact that he’d chosen the farthest corner away from the group was just a little concerning.

Joshua, on his part, didn’t voice too many complaints, lying face up in the middle of the room.

None saw the others fall asleep. Reinhard was the last to go.

His nightmares were full of things he’d never seen; every scene led by people he’d never met. All but one.

He waded through a sea of blood and unfamiliar voices and collapsed against him.

“I’m sorry.” Reinhard murmured.

He held him up when his legs wouldn’t, and he smiled apologetically.

“You are blessed, Reinhard.”

Darkness snuck up behind them. He felt it pull him back to his body.

His arms clenched tightly around his friend. He didn’t seem to be afraid. Why not?

“No…” Reinhard mumbled.

“You have to go now.”

“No.”

“You are blessed, my friend.”

He vanished. Reinhard fell to his knees, and his knees hurt.

You are blessed.

Those words lingered in his mind far past the moment he opened his eyes.

When his consciousness returned to him, he was kneeling beside the bed as if in prayer.

“Blessed.” he murmured, “I am blessed.”

He swore angels were real, and one was watching over him.

He was blessed in many ways since the day of his birth, but few of those blessings came without a curse. His friend, though, had blessed him with something else.

An idea.

Chapter 25: Chapter 25

Reinhard didn't fall asleep again that night.

His own two eyes, that shade of pristine blue that people could never stop complimenting, stared into his soul from the mirror next to where the girls slept.

Emilia's concern about the cold had been justified, and the broken windows downstairs probably weren't helping, but the only reason he even knew it was cold was that he could see how everyone curled up in their sleep. Felix had nestled his slim body as far into the corner as it would go, curled up with his limbs tucked close to his chest; Emilia and Annika, unconsciously, had once again drifted towards one another; Rem, on her part, lay on her stomach with her arms tucked under her, probably in a subconscious attempt to keep them warm; Joshua still lay on his back, but he was hugging the pillow to his chest.

And Reinhard had fallen off the bed.

He wondered if he'd ended up sleepwalking in response to his vivid dreams. *Vivid. Real*, more like. There was nothing about that vision that felt strange: the apparition was so realistic that he'd forgotten that Julius was dead and he couldn't rely on him to hold him up when he fell anymore.

He wondered if he would ever stop forgetting, having to remind himself every time. He wondered if that sting in his gut when he did remember it would ever go away.

He shook his head to dispel those thoughts.

Not now.

He considered his plan and the repercussions. It would mean, at the very least, being out of commission for a few seconds. It was unlikely to be a problem with just the Bishop around, but if his helpers were there…

He paced, barefoot, around his little corner of the room.

For maybe ten seconds, of course.

"You're noisy. Rem needs her beauty sleep."

He almost flinched at the sound of Rem's voice.

"I'm sorry." he whispered, hurriedly retreating to his bed. He felt her eyes on his back.

"No matter." she replied, "I know you have the blessing of Divine Empathy. This is about the worst place for you to sleep."

She wasn't wrong. It was hard to focus on anything he was feeling with everybody's nightmares pressing around him on all sides.

She tilted her head a little, and her hair fell from her covered eye, revealing it glistening in the moonlight: "Thank you for letting me see her." she said, as flatly and yet sincerely as she had said everything else.

He shivered. It hadn't taken long for him to bury Ram's body, with her head sitting on her neck as it should. Everyone was around, of course, but Rem had stood right by his side, too impassible to be unaffected.

He knew, and it wasn't just from the suffocating grief that radiated from her. He knew that there came a phase in people's grief, where they would shove it aside and act normal again.

He was guilty of it, himself. Everyone there was. Annika getting a job, Joshua helping her make dinner, Felix scolding his patients. Reinhard smiling just as he had before.

And, of course, Rem, acting just like her usual self because she didn't know what else to do.

All he could do was nod, politely, as sincerely as he could manage.

Rem looked over her shoulder.

"The child's hair. It bothers me." she admitted, "It's cut very poorly."

"She cut it herself." Reinhard murmured, sparing all the other details of the matter, "I told her I would get her a hairpin but, with everything that happened…"

"Does anyone here have parents?"

Reinhard nearly choked: "Excuse me?"

"It's just something I noticed." Rem shrugged, "That child clearly doesn't have a mother and father, and neither does the other strange child, and neither do I or Emilia. I know that for a fact. I wonder if that is why we all gravitate towards each other like magnets. Because the other magnet is missing, and there is a replacement."

Yes.

"I wonder." he smiled.

Rem didn’t press the issue.

Unfortunately, the news reached them before anyone else woke up.

Fire.

Small fires, all over the country, slowly converging into the most devastating fire Lugnica had ever seen. Their forces, scattered, had only managed to put out some of the fires, and the ones left unattended devoured their surroundings, growing in size until doing anything more than evacuating would be but a hopeless endeavour.

So the messenger told them.

A messenger from the elusive Anastasia Hoshin.

When pressed for details about his master, he simply refused to speak further, and he didn’t have to, because the moment he looked outside Reinhard knew.

The finale.

The curtains were slowly falling. If he was going to gather his players and make a move, it had to be at that exact moment.

Rem, without instructions, turned to everyone who was still sleeping.

She poked at Emilia’s arm: “Wake up. Emilia, wake up.”

Between the two of them, they were quick to wake everyone. Unfortunately, they were not quick enough to explain what was happening before they looked out the window and figured it out for themselves.

“Fire!” Emilia exclaimed, nearly crashing into the window in a dizzy attempt to look closer.

“It’s everywhere.” said Rem, “All over the kingdom. We need to group up and go, now.”

Joshua stood from his bed and steadied himself against the headboard. He couldn't stand up too fast. He couldn't run for long. He could barely *walk* for long. And still, he was safer with them.

Reinhard turned to Felix, the only one still sitting on his mattress. His eyes were wide and glassy, so transparent that Reinhard could almost see a dark figure reflected in them. He helped his friend up and, in exchange, he was the only one to hear what he said.

"Already."

He knew that already, but if he ever needed a confirmation, there it was. He squeezed Felix's hand as reassuringly as he could manage. Realistically, there was no way they were all going to recover anytime soon. There was no way *any* of them were going to recover soon, in fact, but he knew how much even the imaginary arms in his dreams had soothed him. He resolved to be those arms for them.

He turned to the group: "Alright." he started, firm, "I'm sure we all know what is happening. Now is the time to get out there and find the one behind all this. You don't need to worry about him anymore. I have an idea. Before that, though, we should still provide assistance in terms of fire relief and evacuation. Rem, Lady Emilia?"

The two girls nodded in unison. They understood what he was asking.

He turned back to Felix and, much more softly, asked him: "Are you okay with this?"

His friend nodded. His eyes were still reflecting a person that wasn't there, but his posture suggested a determination that he must have taken days to collect.

"What about the children?" asked Rem, pointing at one with each hand. Joshua seemed somewhat annoyed at being referred to as a child, but he didn't object. He put forward a good point instead.

"From my understanding, we had decided to stick together." he observed, "I think it has never applied more than now."

Out of the blue, Reinhard felt an almost painful sting of urgency in his chest.

"Yes, yes." he nodded, "Joshua's right. We have to go, and we have to go together, or this could go horribly wrong."

The looks everyone gave him were a firm *yes* tinted with a shade of *but it could still go horribly wrong.*

Good enough.

As they were leaving, he noticed Felix pulling Lady Emilia aside. Good. He'd understood the signal.

Reinhard had underestimated the fire.

It was an eater, a devourer, it consumed everything around it, burning hotter than a simple bonfire. As they made their way through the ruined Capital, though, they heard nothing but the crackling of the fire.

No screams.

No voices.

No shouts, no orders, no footsteps.

Just the crackle of the fire and the occasional *crash* of a collapsing building. They walked, close together, in the middle of the road, specifically to avoid them.

Lady Emilia extended her hand. There was a flash of gentle white light as a flock of minor spirits swirled around her arm, and the entire street was covered in a thin layer of frost. Thin enough to avoid freezing anyone that might still have been around, thick enough to put the flames at bay, at the very least. And, as a plus she might not have thought of, the magical equivalent of a beacon.

The light of an angler fish.

If the Bishop was anywhere close, and he must have been, her magic would surely draw him out eventually.

Emilia turned to them: “I want to check if anyone is in there.”

“No, you don’t.” Felix mumbled, from where he stood at the back of the group. He ignored Joshua’s brief glare and explained: “I’m sure the spirits know, Lady Emilia, but if someone was in there, they’ve either evacuated or-”

He cut himself off before anyone else could. It didn’t matter. They all got the message.

Regardless, Emilia did close her eyes to commune with the spirits around her.

Her pale face became paler.

“You’re right.” was all she said, and no further investigation was necessary.

Rem gave her what could have been a sympathetic look: “Let’s move on.” she said, “We can contain more of the fire.”

Between the two of them, six more streets were frozen over before they found any sign of life. But, when they did…

He didn’t need confirmation for the identity of the young man standing before them. Felix gave it anyway, just with the look in his eyes.

Reinhard set his hand on the hilt of his sword.

“Go no further.” he commanded.

The young man smiled. It was a smile somewhere between innocent and deranged: “I’m not moving, Reinhard.” he pointed out, slowly, like he was talking to a child.

His voice came out colder than the ice around them when he responded: “And I’m telling you not to move at all. Are you the one behind all this?”

The Bishop didn’t answer. His eyes, devoid of anything but morbid curiosity, swept the group behind Reinhard.

“You’re all here.” he murmured. His smile grew to a crooked grin: “You’re all here! Oh, my, my. If I’d known, I would’ve dressed up nicer.”

“It wouldn’t have spared you anything we’re about to do.” said Rem. Her voice was flat, but the anger that radiated from her was anything but.

The young man gave her a bored look: “Who are you again? Oh. *Oh!* ” he snapped his fingers, “Right, my bad. I almost didn’t recognise you without the other one.”

Rem audibly growled, to which his only response was a laugh: “Hah! Relax a bit, would you? Not my fault you chose to be half of a matching set.”

Before anyone could answer him, his eyes shifted again and then gleamed with delight: “Blue!” he exclaimed, “Nice to see you in one piece. Here to collect your debt?”

Felix's voice was void of emotion: "No." he said, "You can't have my life. But, if you still insist you owe me, I want yours."

"That's mean. Don't know what I expected with that ugly colour you have on. What, am I supposed to call you Red now? Lame."

He looked to the left and tilted his head: "Let's see, we have the nobody, the photocopy, and…"

His eyes lit up with a manic gleam that made Reinhard want to stab him on the spot.

"Emilia. Emilia, Emilia, oh! Your name feels so lovely to speak" he sighed. That single sigh had the power of a hurricane for Emilia, who took two steps back unconsciously. She looked him up and down.

Her cheeks drained of all their colour, she murmured: "You."

The sheer *delight* that exploded from him at that word infected Reinhard with the beginnings of a smile he did not want.

"Yes!" cried the Archbishop, stretching his arms towards her in what looked and felt too much like adoration: "Me! Me! You remember! I expected nothing less from such an angelic being!"

"Stop it." she whispered, "Stop."

"I've wanted to talk to you again for so long, but to think you would remember me…"

"Stop."

"I've been waiting for you, to be ready for you."

"Shut up!" she cried, putting her hands over her ears like a scared child. And she *was* scared. The fear was palpable, but it was the shame he could feel behind it that finally snapped Reinhard out of that hypnotic delight.

He stepped in front of her.

The Bishop's smile fell.

"Hey." he frowned, "Just 'cause you're pretty doesn't mean you get to block the view. I know you're not used to this concept, Reinhard, but not everything is about you."

He wasn't fazed. Not anymore.

"Half of it is." he replied, coldly, "Isn't it? Half of everything you did was just to upset me. Nothing makes me sadder than seeing someone so obsessed with something so ridiculous."

He should not have said that. The young man's grin stretched to an unnatural size: " *Nothing?* " he repeated, "You sure? Well, damn, it must be Christmas! You seemed pretty broken up about all the death and such, but if my life makes you even sadder, then I won the lottery!"

"Why?" Emilia demanded, behind him, "Why all this? Why for me? Why against Reinhard? I don't- I don't-"

She choked back a sob. Annika, standing beside her, grabbed her sleeve in silent support.

But the Bishop, oh.

He looked like he'd been waiting all his life to answer that question.

Uncaring, unforgiving, he looked into her frightened eyes and broke her heart with four words.

“Because I love you.”

There was no way to describe the overwhelming weight of emotions that crushed Reinhard at that moment.

The indignation, was it his? Or Rem’s?

The shame, was it his? Or Emilia’s?

The sadness, whose sadness was it? He couldn’t tell.

All he knew was that the happiness didn’t come from any of them.

“No, you don’t.”

That was Rem.

“You have no idea how this works.” she continued, “It makes me unbelievably angry.”

For once, her voice shook. The Bishop's ecstatic smile faded into a scowl.

"You don't get to tell me that." he mumbled.

“I get to tell you anything I want!” she screamed, “And I tell you that you, despicable bastard, don’t know how this works and never will, because you need emotions for that. You reek of the Witch! You reek of pure nothing! Anyone who can so easily take someone’s family away knows nothing about love.”

Reinhard wanted to hug her. He wanted to strangle her. He wanted to agree with her. He wanted to tell her to shut up.

He shook his head and the anger dissipated. It wasn’t his own. It came from the Bishop, staring at Rem with a twitch in his dark eye.

He turned to Reinhard instead: “Hey. You. Get your dog, will ya?”

A quiet sob distracted them both before they could continue.

Emilia.

Reinhard was done hesitating. He could sense the two assassins watching them from nearby. If he tried anything, the group could be at risk.

Unless, of course, the Bishop agreed to it.

“What do you want?” he asked, “What do you want, exactly?”

He smiled that strange smile: “Reinhard, did your voice crack just now? I didn’t know it could do that.”

“Answer the question.”

“Cold.” he sighed, “But fine. I’m a simple man. I think you know at this point, since Blue can’t keep his mouth shut, but I want Emilia on the throne.”

“And me?”

“You? Tough question. At the beginning of this, I wanted you dead.” the young man shrugged, and something like a laugh began to break through his words, “But… no. No, no, I can’t get anything I want, can I? I have to be limited by those stupid fucking

blessings of yours. I tried. I tried so many times. But noooo… no, you, you perfect bastard, you wouldn't even take a single hit. Why did…"

Something broke through all the irritation then. Something that felt a little too similar to remorse for Reinhard's liking.

"Why did I have to go through so many people, just to get to you?" he laughed, and sobbed, at the same time, "Why can't I kill you like everyone else? Everyone else is so damn fragile, I can hurt them even without meaning to, but you? You're a perfect fucking being, apparently. Why won't you die, huh? Greedy bastard. You think you can just get out of this unscathed?"

He was rambling. He must have been. And yet, it felt strangely sincere.

Reinhard did not point out that no one had come out of it unscathed, himself included. Instead, he apologised to Felix with his eyes.

Felix just looked away.

Reinhard's eyes intently avoided Emilia, trying to hold back her tears and look menacing; Rem, so furious that pink light was beginning to flicker through her hair; Annika, holding Emilia's hand to offer a support her words couldn't provide; Joshua, with his back to them, radiating a whirlwind of emotion that he couldn't possibly be expected to control while the Bishop still stood there and mocked them.

"What's with those looks?" asked the Bishop, seemingly annoyed.

No matter. His decision was made.

Reinhard took a step forward.

"Is that all you want?" he asked.

The young man clearly did not expect it: "Huh?"

"I said, is that all you want?" he repeated, "With everything you've attributed to her, Lady Emilia is sure to be the favourite by now. And her ice can extinguish the fires and help with disaster relief, which will place her even higher. If all you want is my life, you can have it."

He tried to ignore the chorus of gasps behind him. He grasped at that little thread of emotion coming off of the Bishop and focused on that instead; it was a good idea to monitor him. And the surprise was good, but the anger that followed it was a cause for concern.

"Are you messing with me? You'd better not be messing with me!" he barked.

"None of that." Reinhard shook his head, "If you're so hell-bent on killing me, I don't see the point of denying you that. I have to take some responsibility here. Besides, if you promise that, by letting you kill me, you'll leave everyone here alone, we'll both have something to gain."

The anger dissipated into amusement.

"Hah!" scoffed the young man, "I should have known you'd play the hero card. Honestly, I was hoping you'd do it sooner, but I guess you didn't have enough blood on your hands yet."

He ignored the taunt: "Do we have a deal or not?"

"Not so fast. I can set conditions, right? That's how deals work. So, obviously, no one is allowed to heal you or even get close until I've checked that you don't have a pulse. And, after your heart stops, and only after that, Emilia is allowed to kill me."

He couldn't ignore that one. The wave of emotion from behind him grew to an exponential degree, and it was all from Emilia.

"And what if she doesn't want to?"

The Bishop scowled: "That is not how deals work, Reinhard."

"It's fine." a pale, trembling hand set on Reinhard's shoulder, "I'll… I'll do it, but-"

He was quick to pull himself away from her. No need to make the Bishop angrier.

"Thank you, Lady Emilia." he said in a hurry, formal and proper, with a bow of his head.

It was when he was walking to meet the Bishop that he finally noticed where Elsa and Meili were. Elsa, sat on a pile of rubble, was giving her boss a strange look. Meili, using her thick thighs to rest her back, seemed more upset still.

"What's he doing?" she whined. Elsa shushed her.

The Bishop snapped his fingers: "Oh! It goes without saying, of course, but you'll regret breaking any of these conditions."

"I know that." he murmured. It served more as a warning to the group than to him. He ignored Annika yelling at him that it was a stupid idea. Thankfully, Rem, better equipped at understanding the situation, held her back.

Reinhard handed the Bishop his spare sword. The young man eyed the Dragon Sword curiously, but Reinhard was quick to shut that down: "It can't be drawn unless the situation requires it."

"I know." sighed the Archbishop, "I was just taking a closer look. Hey…" he studied Reinhard with suspicious eyes, "You're… not gonna heal from this, are you?"

"No." he replied sincerely, "I cannot use magic. If you inflict a mortal wound, I will die."

"Noted. It goes without saying-"

"I'm not lying about this." he said, firmly, looking him dead in the eyes, "Lying would put everyone in danger. I see your friends are more than ready to strike."

"Guilty." the young man smiled, "But I keep my deals."

He turned the sword over in his hands, looking Reinhard up and down, until his eyes finally settled on the knight's neck. Oh, so he was going for the throat. Good choice.

That was going to hurt.

The Archbishop of Pride did not hesitate. With the flash of a blade, he sliced a clean line across Reinhard's pale neck. Sprays of arterial blood dyed their clothes and their skin red.

Through the ringing in his ears, through the sound of his own dying gasps, Reinhard could hear screaming. Louder than that, though, was a young man's laughter.

He felt a hand on his chest, pressing down to test his heartbeat.

It was the only thing he could feel when it finally stopped.

Chapter 26: End 1- Catharsis

The hand was gone when his consciousness began to return. In its place was another, no, two; one on his forehead, one under his arm, holding him up.

And a whisper.

" *Stay down.* "

The voice repeated it, over and over, so quietly that he could barely hear it, and the hand on his forehead moved in a little circle, calming, reassuring. He didn't need reassurance. He was fine. Death's ice cold kiss, no matter how brief, had turned his bones to marble. But that was fine. He was choking on his own blood only moments before, but that was fine, too.

Blessed, was he?

He recognised the hands and the voice. They belonged to Felix, as did the healing magic he could feel, flowing around his neck without entering it. It was… strange. It was almost like Felix was *pretending* to use his magic, only shifting it around like a peculiar light show instead.

He could see the blue light beyond his closed eyelids.

" *Stay down. Be quiet. Be still. Don't open your eyes yet.* "

It was like a lullaby, a spell. Almost enough to distract him from the other noises. *Almost.*

Someone was screaming. Someone was sobbing. Someone was laughing.

Someone was coming back to life, apparently.

Stay down , why was Felix telling him that?

Right. Right! It was the plan. That was the plan. Reinhard felt the overwhelming urge to gasp for air when his breath finally began to return to its normal speed. He held it instead. He could afford to, now that he had come to his senses again.

With the objective clear in his mind, he focused his attention on the sounds around him.

The one that had screamed, that had to be Annika. Her anger was palpable. He felt bad for not telling her about that particular blessing, but he couldn't risk anyone giving him away.

The one that was sobbing, that was Emilia. Through the sobs, she talked to the one that was laughing.

“Why did you want that? Why do you hate him?”

And, just like that, he stopped laughing, mercurial and unpredictable as he'd always been.

“Aw, Emilia. You look cute even when you're crying, but it sure doesn't suit you as well as a smile.”
“Your flowery words only add insult to injury.” hissed Rem, but Emilia talked over her.

“You didn't answer me! Answer me!”

“Mh…” he seemed to take a moment to think about it, but his voice returned sooner than Reinhard would have liked: “I just didn't like him. I hated him, in fact. No one should be that perfect, no one should be beautiful and powerful and resilient all in one; that's dangerous, you know? It's unreal. I don't like that. Besides, Elsa had a grudge.”

“Don’t drag me into this.” sighed the assassin.

“Was that all you wanted to know, Emilia? Wait, wait, hang on, let me say your name one more time. Emilia. Ah, it just feels so good to speak.”

Emilia’s voice trembled, but she steeled herself and answered back: “You won’t be able to speak for long. We have a deal.”

“Ah, yes, of course!” he laughed, “I’m all yours. Have been since the very beginning. You can kill me now, for all I care. Kill me now, so I can die right.”

Die right. The way he spoke. It was disturbing. He had to wonder what he meant, exactly, but wondering would do him no good and he wasn’t going to ask him.

It was funny, really. In the same, obsessive way the Bishop had wished for his death, Reinhard found himself wanting, every second more, for him to die. Nothing else. He could start from there, but until the Bishop was dead? He was stuck, he would always be stuck, living in fear.

Silent and still on the outside, he let his insides boil up into a single wish and threw it at Emilia.

And she caught it.

“ *El Huma.* ”

“I love you.”

Splat. Squelch. A cacophony of the ugly sounds of flesh being torn echoed through that silent little corner of the city.

Dying breaths and gasps that made Felix’s hand tremble against his side.

He couldn’t help but open his eyes to meet his friend’s; he found them glassy at first, lost in the memory of a similar sound, until they were lit once again by a spark of determination and pure, intense spite.

“Okay.” Felix said, “ *Now* you can get up.”

And get up he did, brushing the dust off his bloodied coat. Finally, he got to look into the eyes of the one who’d ruined the lives of everyone that stood behind him and beside him; finally, he got to stare into those eyes and find them, if only for a moment, completely lost. Felix was spiteful, and he had every right to be. Reinhard was spiteful, and perhaps he had some right to be, as well. Even if that weren’t the case, he couldn’t bring himself to care.

The Bishop was pinned to the ground by six shards of ice, three through his torso, three through his limbs. Reinhard looked into those dark eyes and found everything and nothing.

The Bishop smiled. Why did he *smile?*

“Have a-” he hacked, “Have a good life, Reinhard.”

His final breath was his final curse: “I won’t fall for it again…” he wheezed, and said nothing else.

Reinhard felt the seams of his sanity stretch and pull. He tightened them again. No time. *No time.*

He turned to the Bowel Hunter, who sat silently, uselessly attempting to contain the other’s whining.

"Why did he do that??" cried the child in her lap.

She just sighed. Her hand ran through the little girl's hair: "Didn’t I tell you? He was a moron."

The little girl continued to whine, but at least she wasn’t trying anything.

Reinhard stared at Elsa for what felt like ages until she finally deigned him worthy of a response.

"Oh, my." she tilted her head, "Do you want to fight me? You look like you do."

She hoisted the child in her arms, ignoring her quiet protests, and continued: "If you want to, I have no issue with that. But do you really want to fight still, Sword Saint? We can both cut our losses right here."

He felt a shiver running up his spine. What she was so casually offering was invaluable. No more losses. It could all be over, right then and there. But-

"I won't bother you." she sighed, "Down the line, who knows? But you don’t have to worry about me being vengeful. I am not petty. And you look tired."

Damn her, she was right.

Reinhard couldn’t bring himself to speak. He just nodded his head, only once, and she walked over to the Bishop's lifeless body.

Lulled by the distant fires and his still running blood, the ice was already beginning to melt. Elsa pulled out the largest shard, the one that pinned him by the stomach, and stared, almost entranced, at its bloodied tip.

"What do you know?" she smiled, "Ice can be lovely, too."

Just like that, the assassins and the body vanished in the silence of the Capital.

Should he have chased them? Maybe. Was he going to? No. No, he barely felt able to move at that moment.

He turned back to the group. No, he didn’t. He had every intention to, but he didn’t. He couldn’t turn back. He couldn’t even move.

Something must have been wrong. Everyone must have felt such crushing despair for him to feel so overwhelmed.

It was only when he collapsed to his knees that he realised it all came from within him.

That paralysing sadness came from him. All of it. His chest began to hurt. Was it over? Was it really over?

Something that sounded too much like a sob shoved its way out of his throat. He covered his mouth, but the sound remained; it echoed in his ribs, shaking him to the core, until he couldn’t contain it anymore.

In the frozen ruins of the Capital, Reinhard sobbed like a lost child.

He hated the guttural wails that climbed up his chest to escape through his mouth. He hated the tears that burned his eyes. He hated how his knees scraped against the uneven road as he tried to curl in on himself.

He did not hate it, though, when a pair of arms snuck around his torso and locked just over his heart.

Felix.

Someone took his left hand.

Annika.

Someone took his right hand.

Joshua.

Someone ran their hand through his hair.

Emilia.

Someone rubbed a circle into his shoulders.

Rem.

They were all alive, if anything. Alive, and there, and kind, and beautiful. Shining souls battered by the wind that, unlike him, dared to consume it and burn even brighter.

He did not feel like that. He felt like a flickering candle. The wind was going to blow him out. It was-

It wasn't. He was rooted to the ground, solidly, anchored by all those arms around him.

For the first time, he realised they weren't going to let his flame burn out.

Just once, he let himself cry like a child.

Just once, he felt like he deserved it.

He didn't take more than a few hours to himself. There was more to do, still, and he couldn't afford to keep thinking it was all over forever.

Rebuilding was not going to be easy.

Sure, the fire had been eventually put out, but their losses were not insignificant, and most of the citizens were left without a home to return to. For a month at least, everyone worked, steadily, to save what could be saved and build anew what couldn't; Reinhard, with the support and protection of the favourite, Lady Emilia, and with her giving him credit for their victory, was on the front lines of the rebuilding efforts. In confidence, though, she had broken down and begged him, Puck and Rem to advise her: the thought of gaining the throne through the Bishop's actions made her sick, she confessed. The verdict was near unanimous. Rem spoke for everyone when she told her: "It's okay if you don't want to be Queen."

Nothing was official, but at least Emilia looked a little more serene. They all felt like that, somewhat, immersed as they were in their respective work.

Days passed him by without many thoughts beyond the wood and stone in his hands; perhaps, it was better that way.

It was on one such day, though, that Joshua approached him, his brow tense and beaded with sweat. Joshua could not do much physical work, and had therefore been relegated to nursing duty, one he took without complaints, as long as he wasn't too close to Felix. There were many injured, after all, and help was very much needed.

But to see him leave the infirmaries and run towards Reinhard was concerning.

Still, he didn't let it show on his face when he greeted him: "Hello, Joshua. Is something wrong?"

The boy took a moment to catch his breath.

"No." he panted, "But… something *is* urgent."

Reinhard came a little too close to frowning for his liking: "Yes?"

Joshua handed him a small note with graceful handwriting on the envelope.

"Lady Anastasia wants to talk to you."

Anastasia Hoshin was a clever, elusive, well-protected young woman. Her walls were high and solid, and she only very rarely let someone in.

She had all but vanished after Julius's death and, though she had not declared her withdrawal from the Royal Selection, everyone had sort of taken it for granted after hearing nothing from her.

Lady Priscilla had not been very present lately, either. There were rumours she was scared, and many laughed at those rumours. But the seeds of doubt had been planted.

Reinhard had received an invitation to a lone little house, far away from the city. It would take at least a day to go and come back, but he was ready. He'd been wanting to talk to her for so long, ask her what she knew and why and how she felt.

Easy , he reminded himself, *don't overwhelm her.*

It wasn't easy to keep his cool, though. Not when Lady Anastasia stared into his soul from across the meager table.

"I know ya wanna talk." she chuckled, "Well, go on. Whatcha waitin' for?"

Even a sliver of encouragement was enough to make his thoughts burst.

"I'm sorry." he blurted out, and he wasn't sure why he'd led with that.

The lady seemed to share that opinion. She frowned: "Is that your default? *Sorry?* I mean, I know yer polite, but boy, ya got it bad."

"Right." he murmured, "Listen, Lady Anastasia…"

"I'm all ears."

"I'm…" he felt all the words that had been buzzing in his head fade, just when he needed them most, "...not… sure where to start, if that makes sense."

The sincerity did not go unappreciated.

"Aw, okay then. I'll start, how 'bout we start with Joshua?"

That… was a point he had intended to bring up, eventually. He just hadn't expected her to lead with it.

"Right, yes." he nodded, "He's been staying with me for months now. If… if you have a better accommodation for him, I-"

"You misunderstand, hun." she chuckled, "I ain't that mean. If he's doin' fine with you, I ain't gonna bother you. Thanks for takin' care of my ambassador for me."

"Oh…"

"What?"

"It's nothing, my lady. I just…" he sighed, "I didn't expect you to say that. I mean, I understand why you wouldn't want to come in right… well, right after the fact, when both of your wounds were still fresh. But now that he's doing better…"

Anastasia winked: "Oh, Sir Reinhard, he ain't the type that makes friends easily. Why would I ruin that?"

So she knew quite a bit, it turned out.

Reinhard felt the urge to change the subject: "About Lady Emilia…"

He trailed off. Thankfully, Anastasia was perceptive: "Yeah, her. So, you her knight now?"

"No!" he raised his hands, defensively: "No, no. The issue is, Lady Emilia has… unofficially, so far, confessed that she would rather withdraw from the selection, and-"

"And y'all want me to run for King again."

Her smile fell into a neutral face. Not a good sign, but not a bad sign. It made him nervous.

She sighed, dissolving the tension with a brutal: "No."

Reinhard felt his stomach drop: "But-"

"Not anytime soon, Sir Reinhard. Not after what happened. I ain't stupid. If I get a warnin', I'm takin' it."

Unconsciously, he clenched his fists: "Julius-"

"-told me to stay safe." she interrupted, coldly, "Don't drag 'im into this. Do I look like a liar to ya? Ya know, promises are important to me. An' that's why anythin' that infringes upon my safety just ain't gonna happen."

It took him longer than he would have liked to recover from her rebuttal.

"The Bishop is long dead." he murmured, "You aren't in danger."

"Ain't I, now?" she smiled, "Well, okay. If nothin' happens for another six months or so, I might take you up on that."

"That's too long."

"Is it, though?"

"What if Lady Priscilla wins, in the meantime?" he frowned. That was the last thing he wanted. For another selfish, powerful, irrational person to be in control again. Anastasia was their best option, and they both knew it.

Anastasia, though, didn't look too worried. She *smiled* , in fact. Smiled and began digging through the inside pockets of her coat.

"Oh, that ain't gonna happen." she assured him, "Ya see, I hear Lady Priscilla *lost* her insignia, and she's just been keepin' it hidden in hopes of findin' it again."

His head spun.

"You don't mean-"

"I sure hope she can find it before the Council gets wind of it." she smiled, puffing out her chest so the tiny jewel pinned to the inside of her coat could catch the light, "Would be a real shame if she didn't."

Reinhard couldn't believe his eyes, or his ears. Anastasia had committed an incredibly serious crime, in a time of crisis, and then bragged about it to a knight. And yet…

"You know I'm an imperial knight." he murmured, his last, weak attempt at a protest.

She just smiled, and tucked her coat around herself again: "Yes, but you ain't gonna tell anyone. It's our little secret."

He knew she was right.

She knew it too, without any need for him to say it. She walked away with a smile.

"Oh, and… Sir Reinhard?" she called, turning back just under the arch of the door, "If ya promise me that I'm not in danger, I'll think about it."

He could, and he did.

As he walked back, he felt as though a weight had been lifted from his heart. But it was soon replaced by another, jagged and insidious, nestled right above his heart.

Those last words the Bishop had given him, *I won't fall for it again* .

He didn’t act like someone who was dying. Was he going to be back? Did he know he was going to be back?

It was over too quickly. For everything that had happened, for months of torment, the situation had essentially resolved itself. It couldn’t be the end, could it?

Reinhard shivered. He would be *blessed* , indeed, if he never saw his face again.

His walk gradually became a sprint.

Just in case.

He knew those words would stay with him the rest of his life. He just hoped they remained words, and nothing else.

Never a reality.

In that timeline, the Bishop was never seen again.

But the fear of his final words would never vanish from Reinhard's heart.

Chapter 27: End 2- Permafrost

The first thing he felt was cold. It was also the last.

Children are dragged out of the warmth of the womb, into the cold; Reinhard lost all his blood and he returned to the cold. And then, as he was regaining his consciousness, there it was again: all around him, in his hands, in his legs, in the icy breeze that was starting to get under his sleeves.

But no, there was a spot of warmth. It was on his chest, his neck, some of it was on his face. And it was… dripping, spilling, pouring from somewhere above him.

Something was wrong. He only realised what the warm thing was when the drop that lingered at the corner of his mouth lost its balance and fell on his tongue. It tasted like iron.

It tasted like blood.

His eyes shot open, only to meet someone else's. A lingering hint of shock was slowly fading from Felix's eyes, along with any trace of life that might have been there before, along with everything that was his before, along with the blood that slowly, steadily dripped from the open gash that went all the way through his neck.

He could see the light on the other side. That was how deep the wound went, and yet Felix still sat and held him with limp arms.

He had died too quickly to move away.

Against his most protective instincts, Reinhard pushed himself off his lap in horror. The blood that had felt like reassuring warmth when he'd first opened his eyes began to burn like hellfire on his skin the moment he knew who it belonged to. And if only it were over, if only for a second he could have paused to take in the sight of his friend's corpse; but Reinhard's grief would not stop there.

The icy wind all around him was beginning to turn into a blizzard. The blood on his jacket froze solid in a matter of seconds, making the lapels of his coat crunch and crack as they were blown about by the wind. He knew before he turned around where, or who, that cold wind came from, but that was the only thing he expected. Not everything else.

Emilia wept, bitterly, incoherently, kneeling on the ground. In her arms, already half covered in silver frost, he could just make out the unmoving silhouette of what used to be Rem; she had collapsed against her former master, unable to stand and unable to breathe after being stabbed twice in the spine. The first wound, just as deep as Felix's, was in the middle of her back; the second, with a kukri still lodged in it, at the very top.

Reinhard already wanted to scream before he turned his eyes to the left to see two smaller figures sprawled out on the ground, covered by a thin layer of snow that the dwindling heat of their bodies could not melt.

Annika's neck, or what used to be her neck, had been almost entirely torn out. The teeth marks were so evident that he could have counted them, had he been able to stare at her for any longer. But he couldn't. Nor could he keep looking at Joshua, lying on his stomach, with his long lavender hair crowning his head like a halo, having escaped the ribbon that tied it. He couldn't see any blood on him, but he did not look peaceful at all. His face, still so unbearably familiar, was tight with pain and shock. Venom.

It was as his eyes set on him, specifically, that Reinhard heard a faint, wheezing laugh from behind, carried by the wind.

"You know…" hissed a voice behind him, "...almost didn't recognise him."

The Bishop had been impaled twice through the gut by thick shards of ice that gave no sign of ever melting. He was standing, somehow, leaning on a pile of debris for support as his frost-covered legs slowly began to freeze solid.

His smile, now stretched with pain, looked even crueler: "Guess… it's hard to see the resemblance when they're not gasping for air."

That was too much. Too far, even for him. Reinhard, if asked, could not have described the tempest that raged inside him at that comment. It was so cold it burned, and its winds blew faster than the blizzard around him.

He knew where to aim.

Like a wild animal, blind with rage, he lunged at the half-frozen Archbishop of Pride. The neck. Like a beast, he went for the neck.

He was well aware that he didn't need to squeeze, with the strength he had. But he only wanted two things, then: to shut him up, and to ensure he would never cause harm again. Maybe, he even wanted revenge. Regardless, he squeezed, only for his fingers to crack and shatter the Bishop's neck. His head fell, too, and just the same as the neck, was pulverised the moment it hit the ground. Reinhard had pushed him in his attempt to strangle him and his legs had broken off at the thigh. He was now holding nothing more than a frozen torso, with only one arm still attached, which somehow still mocked him, even after death, even after that smile had been literally broken to pieces.

Even that was enough to make him feel like the Bishop was still standing, still mocking him.

He threw the frozen torso to the ground, where it shattered into a million pieces, and kicked at what used to be his nemesis's legs until nothing but strangely coloured dust remained.

It was only after that that the ringing in his ears began to fade.

It was only after the ringing faded that he could hear Emilia again.

She wasn't screaming anymore. She whispered, over and over, a single syllable.

"Die. Die. Die. *Die. Die.* "

She whispered it, entranced, as the storm raged within and around her. In the eye of the storm, the gentle Emilia spilled the darkness of her heart into the ruined street. The bishop was gone, the assassins had vanished. Everything that the fire had devoured, the ice blanketed and made shine in what little light was left. Everyone that had been killed, the snow pitied and covered in a pure white funeral shroud.

And, among that, only the Sword Saint and the Frozen Witch remained alive.

And she was losing her mind, it was clear, with every second. Grief devoured her from the inside out, more quickly than any plague or poison, until there was nothing left but the word *die* and the tears that froze directly on her cheeks.

The moment he saw those tears, Reinhard knew that he was going to lose her, too.

"La- *Emilia!* " he called, running to her side, but the ice between them had already reached above her waist. He shouted, again, trying to make himself heard over the howling of the wind: "Emilia, stop! Please, stop! He's dead, they're- they're gone, there's nothing- there was nothing you could have- stop. Please, please, stop! You're going to freeze yourself! You're going to- please, stop!"

His voice cracked.

“ *Lia!* ” shouted a voice inside her pendant, but it fell silent immediately.

Merciless, the ice continued to climb up her slender form. It encased her and Rem's body, entwined forever, in a transparent mausoleum. Deaf to his pleas, Emilia continued to whisper her final wish until the ice reached her face and she couldn't move her lips anymore.

But she continued to think it, to feel it, until she had been completely buried.

And Reinhard ran. He ran away, as quickly as possible. Because, at the very last moment of her consciousness, all of Emilia's palpable, crushing despair had given way to relief.

He could still feel that relief. Was it hers, or his? He didn't know which was worse.

He ran.

Reinhard knew, somewhere within, that the public deserved an explanation, and all the help they could get.

And yet, for some reason, the mere thought of ever looking someone in the eyes again made him wish he had no eyes at all. The moment he even considered returning anywhere people could see him, his legs froze.

He spent a week, at least, lingering near the center of the permafrost that had engulfed what used to be the Capital, where no one dared to venture. It was all white. Everything was covered by a thick layer of snow that wouldn't melt no matter how bright the sun shone on it; and the sun was not shining, still trapped behind a curtain of smoke. He wandered the frozen wasteland without a single thought in his mind that was worth mentioning, even to himself. One word came to mind anytime he decided not to return to society just yet, though: *selfish.*

Reinhard was powerful, he knew it. He probably could have helped rebuild, he knew that too. But why did he owe them help? Why did he owe them every ounce of his fading strength, when he could barely find it in himself to stand? Why did he have to talk to them? Why was he expected to be in every place at once? Why had fate seen it fit to take every single semblance of normalcy he could possibly find from him?

In all the world, there did not exist a person that would look at him as a friend, anymore. Why would he even try, at that point?

Reinhard finally found it in himself to return to the center of the permafrost, where five ice statues stood silent and still. From most of them, he sensed nothing. But from the block of ice that stood tall among all of them, there was something different. Like a beacon, it gave off steady, captivating relief.

She was still alive. She must have been. And he did not want to go anywhere until she woke up again. If there was even the slightest chance that she would wake up, somehow, she would need help, he told himself. She would need his help to get through the wasteland.

That was why he stayed there, reluctantly basking in that strange relief he could still feel.

It wasn't as disgusting anymore. He wondered why he wasn't repulsed as before.

The answer, the one he didn't want to hear, was: *it was still relief.*

It wasn't his, that emotion that fascinated him, but it was there. He let himself collapse against the pillar of ice and closed his eyes. The cold did not impede his sleep in the slightest.

He didn't know how much time had passed since he'd fallen asleep there when he finally woke up. He only knew that the presence that had made his dreams a solace

throughout the past few months now radiated an inexplicable sorrow. Sadness, even disappointment, perhaps. The presence that had stood strong through his dreams now seemed inconsolable, and it was breaking his heart. That, not himself, was what had pushed him to wake up, at last.

And, when he did wake up, he was covered in frost.

His question about how much time had passed was answered the moment he looked up into the sky. It was nighttime, and the moon was high in the sky.

The stars were different than when he'd fallen asleep.

Two months. He had slept for two months.

He had confirmation from Anastasia that it had been two months. She stared in clear disgust at the old, frozen blood on his jacket. She, and her entourage, knowing he must have been there, were the only ones brave or calculating enough to venture into the wasteland.

They brought him back to their hideout, and that was how he found himself sitting across a table from her. He refused to change. He refused to do anything but stay just long enough to talk to her and then return to the frozen Emilia.

It was only when he was sitting so close to Anastasia that he realised his mistake. It wasn't disgust that he could feel coming from her. It was… pity. The disgust was all him. It was, if possible, even worse. He could accept her being disgusted, disappointed, angry, but her pitying him had never been part of the equation.

He didn't know how to handle it. Until she started speaking.

"Ya know…" she started, "I don't wanna sound mean, but ya look pathetic. I've never seen someone so beat up before."

He shot her a half-hearted glare that looked more like a plea than a warning.

She took it for what it was and pressed on: "Ya haven't changed, or talked, or eaten in two months. Honey, ya got it bad. We got some extras here. Ya wanna stick around 'till dinner?"

He didn't know what the feeling crushing his heart was. Was it joy, or anger? He couldn't tell anymore. He had no one to compare it with.

But staying there was not acceptable. Staying near anyone was not acceptable, unless it was Emilia. What if she woke up alone, surrounded by frozen corpses? It would destroy her a second time. And then, once she'd been returned to the people that had begun to love her, she wouldn't need him anymore, and he could go back to being alone. No more confusion, no more sorrow, nothing but… well, nothing. He wanted *nothing.* Being near Anastasia, he could already feel a mix of different emotions radiating from her, and from her mages, and her mercenaries, and it was already too much.

If he could just feel nothing.

Desperate to stay and yet desperate to get away, he blurted out: "So you can replace your old knight?"

That was not what he'd meant to say. It was not. He hadn't even been thinking it, why had he said that? Oh, right. So she would leave him alone.

Well, it worked.

Anastasia's sympathetic smile fell.

The temperature in the room seemed to drop, along with the tone of her voice.

“No, Sir Reinhard.” she said, slowly, coldly, “I don’t need a replacement. I don’t need support. I won’t be a candidate for long.”

His heart jumped to his throat: “You won’t? But-”

“I don’t care.” she interrupted. What he could feel from her had changed. What had been pity turned to anger, what had been sympathy faded into apathy. “I don’t care what you wanna say to me, the simple truth ta this matter is: I’m gonna drop out of the Royal Selection, and I won’t let rude guests change my mind.”

He regretted, once again, what he’d told her. *Rude* was an understatement. It was more like *disrespectful, cruel,* maybe *hurtful* would be the best word.

He bowed his head: “Please, forgive me. I don’t know why I said that, I-”

“Oh, I do.” she glared, “What, ya gonna blame me for that, too? Wouldn’t be the first time.”

“What?” he breathed.

“Ya think I never heard the rumours about the royal bitch that got her knight killed?”

“No, I-”

“It’s an old joke now.” she said, coldly, “It ain’t funny, and it never was. Ya wanna go with those jokers, ya can’t be under my roof.”

“I’m s-”

“Shut up.”

He did. Strangely, he did.

She sighed, heavily, regaining her composure somewhat: “I was gonna ask if ya wanted to stay here for a while, but I can see it’s a *no.* ”

It was, wasn’t it? He had basically told her *no.* Not directly, but he had definitely been trying to get her to leave him alone.

So why was his heart so heavy when she told him to get out?

He dragged himself to the door, breathing deeply. Maybe if he expanded his chest enough, it would become a little lighter. It didn’t.

Just before her entourage could shut the door on him, he blocked it: “Wait.”

She turned back to him, and she looked just as tired as he was: “What?”

He only had one question for her.

“Why did you give up?”

She walked over to the door, gently pushing his hand away from it. And it had been so long since someone had touched him that he allowed her to.

She smiled tiredly: “Unlike you, Sir Reinhard, I’ve still got somethin’ to lose.”

The door was shut in his face.

Reinhard returned to the wasteland. It was the only place he could ever be at peace in, he knew that. He sat by the ice pillar. Mercifully, the three corpses outside of it had

been long since completely encased in silver snow. He could just barely see their silhouettes.

“I’m sorry.” he told Emilia, “It was… It was a bad plan. And then I went to him right away, and… and if I’d gone to you, maybe…”

He trailed off.

The beacon of relief didn’t change, or even waver.

She couldn’t hear him.

Reinhard closed his eyes, rested his head, and hoped the next time he woke up it would be July again.

Maybe then her prison would melt.

Maybe then he would finally feel relief that was his own.